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Auctions and the Making of the Nabob in Late Eighteenth-Century Calcutta and London

Patrick D. Rasico 

Department of History and Political Science, Fisk University, Nashville, TN, USA
Email: prasicod@fisk.edu

Abstract

This article examines the meanings and controversies surrounding sales by public auction in British colonial Calcutta and in London during the last decades of the eighteenth century. For Britons living in Calcutta's European sector, auctions were essential for acquiring imported European items that granted a sense of gentility and Britishness abroad. Public sales in Calcutta provided Britons with goods that instilled the fantasy of living in a British geography in India. However, by the last quarter of the century, 'sales by hammer' throughout the colonial world carried association with corruption, cruelty, and orientalizing in the metropolitan imagination. In Britain, textual and visual accounts circulated of Europeans transforming into debauched 'nabobs', of the horrors of American slave auctions, and of the British East India Company's use of public sales to defraud and abuse prominent Indians. For some metropolitan observers, sales by hammer were a deceitful means of seizing property and status from the traditional landed elite of India and Britain. British critics feared that colonial auction practices could become common in Britain and could lead to the upending of social hierarchization and the normalization of slavery in the metropolis.

Shortly after Warren Hastings and his wife, Marian, left India for retirement in Britain in late 1784, auctioneers sold their homes in Calcutta. Sales held at the Old Court House and at William Bonfield's auction room in the 'white town' of Calcutta disposed of their land, buildings, and myriad household goods.¹ As governor general of the East India Company (EIC), Hastings had himself patronized 'Europe shops' and auctions to acquire an art collection, imported 'Europe goods', and other status symbols.² Earlier that year, in July 1784, Marian Hastings and the governor general attended auctioneer George

¹ Anonymous, 'To be sold by auction by Mr. Bonfield', *Calcutta Gazette* (Calcutta, India), 3 Mar. 1785; Anonymous, 'To be sold by Messrs. Williams and Lee at the Old Court House', *Calcutta Gazette*, 21 Apr. 1785.

² 'Europe shops' were retailers of recently imported goods from Europe. Thomas Williamson, *The East India vade-mecum; or, complete guide to gentlemen* (2 vols., London, 1810), II, pp. 169–70;

Williams's 'public outcry' (open auction) of Lieutenant Colonel John Green's estate. Along with inexpensive volumes of 'Chesterfield's Letters' and 'Philosophical Transactions', the Hastingses placed winning bids for some remarkable items. Mrs Hastings paid 136 rupees for a pair of black busts, and Warren Hastings bid double that amount for an ornate British fusil and a 'Europe cross bow'. Hastings and his 'Anglo-Indian' colleagues were not the only buyers at Calcutta auctions. At this same sale, wealthy South Asians – such as Nilmony Sirkar and Ramkesore Doss – won forty of the nearly four hundred lots crossing the auction block.³ Although Anglo-Indians depended upon public outcries for the material comforts and reminders of home,⁴ South Asians' purchases at auction scattered European imports and other white town goods throughout Calcutta, which revealed any separation of the white and black towns to be an illusion.⁵ For some British observers, the scene of persons from across the racial spectrum bidding, buying, and socializing could have resembled 'sales by hammer' in Britain, where much social mixing also occurred. Colonial auctions, nevertheless, sparked debate and received condemnation in the metropole. As this article shows, just as metropolitan auctions could be fashionable events where bidders competed for material status symbols,⁶ residents of Calcutta's white town depended upon public outcries to acquire goods that engendered a sense of politeness and Britishness abroad. However, accounts of Britons transforming themselves into nefarious 'nabobs',⁷ and of the Company's use of 'wild and wicked auction[s]' to usurp land and riches in India, rendered white town sales as contentious sites of corruption in the metropolitan imagination.⁸

Several studies detail the entwined rise of fine art markets and famed London auction firms during the Georgian period,⁹ but the contemporaneous development of sales by hammer in the EIC's Indian territories remains largely overlooked. By the seventeenth century, the EIC and other mercantile bodies

Anonymous, 'Inventories: household goods of Warren Hastings at Daylesford', British Library (BL) Add MS 41609.

³ Anonymous, 'Account sale of sundries sold at public outcry...on account of the estate of Lt. Colonel John Green', 20–5 July 1784, BL IOR/L/AG/34/27/6.

⁴ This article employs the contemporary usage of the term 'Anglo-Indian' as specifying a Briton who spent considerable time in South Asian geographies, climates, and cultural milieus. Since there was not a singular, coherent definition of Britishness, Anglo-Indians used this term and the word 'British' to self-identify.

⁵ Swati Chattopadhyay claims that although Calcutta residents used the terms 'black town' and 'white town' when referring to certain regions of the city, there was not a clear separation of these geographies and social spheres. Swati Chattopadhyay, 'Blurring boundaries: the limits of "white town" in colonial Calcutta', *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 59 (2000), pp. 154–7.

⁶ Cynthia Wall, 'The English auction: narratives of dismantlings', *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 31 (1997), pp. 1–25.

⁷ The term 'nabob' had its origins in the Persian word 'nawab', meaning governor or deputy.

⁸ Edmund Burke, 'Speech on opening of impeachment', in P. J. Marshall, ed., *The writings and speeches of Edmund Burke* (9 vols., Oxford, 1991–2015), VI, p. 382.

⁹ Percy Colson, *A story of Christies* (London, 1950); Nicholas Faith, *Sold: the rise and fall of the house of Sotheby* (New York, NY, 1985); Frank Herrman, *Sotheby's: portrait of an auction house* (London, 1980); Robert Lacey, *Sotheby's: bidding for class* (Boston, MA, 1998).

sold colonial imports in London through the ‘inch of candle’ ascending-bid format.¹⁰ Following the easing of import restrictions in the 1680s, specialized sales drove female and male art connoisseurs and spectators alike to auction rooms.¹¹ During the eighteenth century, estate and luxury auctions became more frequent and well attended as a more robust consumer culture developed interwoven with industrialization and the emergence of a larger middling sector.¹² In recent decades, scholars have underscored how auctions were rituals intimately tied to social transformations. As Cynthia Wall suggests, by making material status symbols available to the public, British auctions both redistributed elites’ property and presented diverse audiences with the possibility of attaining gentility through ownership.¹³ As popular performances capable of reducing the trappings of elite status to financial transactions, auctions were not without controversy.¹⁴ Sales by hammer were contentious spectacles where ruthless bidding, the sale of estates and luxuries, and socializing between elites and the lower orders could blur the boundaries of status and Britishness, in both London and Calcutta.

Literature on auctions primarily examines the rise of eighteenth-century metropolitan firms as artistic institutions and genteel social spaces frequented by connoisseurs.¹⁵ Yet, contemporary travel writers and guidebooks advised readers against attending London auctions by claiming that most were ‘entertainments...for the use of the idle and indolent’. Some attendees sought goods, but most ‘bid for everything and buy nothing’.¹⁶ During the last decades of the century, prominent London auctioneers – such as James Christie and Abraham Langford – transformed their sales into polite commercial performances.¹⁷ Despite the establishment of respectable firms, rumours and reports of overzealous bidding, deceitful practices of ‘puffing’, dishonest auctioneers, and buyers paying ‘dearer than he needs to’ perpetuated the dubious reputations of auctions.¹⁸ While earlier accounts had complained that auctions were ‘one

¹⁰ The audience bid on a lot until one inch of a candle had burned. The Company sold imports in London by this method throughout the eighteenth century. Anonymous, *The London guide, describing public and private buildings of London, Westminster, & Southward* (London, 1782), p. 91.

¹¹ Iain Pears, *The discovery of painting: the growth of interest in the arts in England, 1680–1768* (New Haven, CT, 1988), pp. 57–67.

¹² Neil McKendrick, John Brewer, and J. H. Plumb, *The birth of a consumer society: the commercialization of eighteenth-century England* (Bloomington, IN, 1982), pp. 9–33.

¹³ Wall, ‘The English auction’, pp. 1–7. Auctions were popular spectacles and fashionable gatherings, but they could also be traumatic for persons as death and bankruptcy forced possessions to cross the auction block.

¹⁴ Anne Nellis Richter, ‘Spectacle, exoticism, and display in the gentleman’s house: the Fonthill auction of 1822’, *Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 41 (2008), pp. 555–6.

¹⁵ Richard Altick, *The shows of London* (Cambridge, MA, 1978); Jeremy Cooper, *Under the hammer: the auctions and auctioneers of London* (London, 1977); Wall, ‘The English auction’.

¹⁶ James Ralph, *The taste of the town; or, a guide to all publick diversions* (London, 1731), p. 233.

¹⁷ Satomi Ohashi, ‘The Auction Duty Act of 1777: the beginning of institutionalization of auctions in Britain’, in Jeremy Warren and Adriana Turpin, eds., *Auctions, agents, and dealers: the mechanisms of the art market, 1660–1830* (Oxford, 2008), pp. 21–3.

¹⁸ Some disreputable auctioneers paid ‘puffers’ to place fake bids. Anonymous, *Town and Country Magazine*, 4 (London, 1772), p. 192; John Bowle to James Granger, 12 Jan. 1774, in J. P. Malcolm, ed.,

of the principal amusements of all ranks, from the duke and duchess to the pick-pocket and streetwalker',¹⁹ into the early nineteenth century observers criticized sales as an environment where polite Britons behaved like 'oriental' individuals haggling in an Asian bazaar. Lord Henry Bathurst, the colonial secretary, complained that 'we see a clergyman, a barrister, or a physician, truckling among a parcel of "low fellows" at Squibbs's, Robins's, or Leigh and Sotheby's', which resulted in there being little 'difference in point of refinement between Grand Cairo in the midst of Barbarians, and rich Liverpool, in the midst of polished society'. Because 'the bad passions gain such ascendancy over them', auctioneers were akin to 'a horde of trafficking Arabs', and audience members 'change[d] into a sort of Ishmaelites'.²⁰

These apprehensions were increasingly interwoven with reports of auctions in colonial spaces, where public bids and purchases could confer a sense of Britishness. Yet, colonial auctions were also prominent scenes of sociability between colonizer and colonized, rituals linked to the negotiation of race and class, and, at times, mechanisms of conquest in South Asia. By the last half of the eighteenth century, disparaging accounts identified these public sales as reflecting and reaffirming debauched, alien colonial social norms. As harrowing accounts of American slave auctions along with rumours of subcontinental nabobish depravity circulated in Britain, Calcutta outcries appeared to metropolitan observers as sites of corruption, orientalizing, and the articulation of growing racial disparity. Moreover, since colonial auction practices could potentially infiltrate metropolitan sales rooms, critics claimed that attendees of sales were in danger of degenerating into oriental-like persons or that slave auctions could become a regular occurrence in Britain. As the abolitionist Granville Sharp warned, if colonial auction practices were normalized in Britain, then 'no person can be safe'.²¹ This article examines the function of auctions in the construction of imagined British geographies in India, as well as in metropolitan responses to Company rule, which reveals the importance of sales by hammer in debates about the transformative effects of empire.

In Calcutta, auctions were important arenas of Anglo-Indian sociability and European material culture acquisition that enabled British denizens to imagine the white town as a subcontinental region of Britain. Despite the heterogeneities, fragmentations, and incongruities of metropolitan and imperial geographies throughout this period, British residents of Calcutta sought to collapse the distance between 'home' and abroad. A growing body of scholarship details how the circulation of material culture between Britain and Bengal aided Anglo-Indians in envisioning Calcutta's white town as an appendage of London.²² The Company's

Letters between the Rev. James Granger, rector of Shiplake, and many of the most eminent literary men of his time (London, 1805), p. 45.

¹⁹ Ralph, *The taste of the town*, pp. 231–2.

²⁰ The term 'Ishmaelite' referred to persons of the Arabian Peninsula. Lord Henry Bathurst, *The ruinous tendency of auctioneering* (London, 1812, 1848), pp. 7, 35–9.

²¹ Granville Sharp, *A representation of the injustice and dangerous tendency of tolerating slavery* (London, 1769), p. 89.

²² Daniel E. White, *From Little London to Little Bengal: religion, print, modernity in early British India, 1793–1835* (Baltimore, MD, 2013), pp. 3–6; Natasha Eaton, 'Excess in the city? The consumption of

territorial expansion and the movement of people, money, and goods between Britain and India complicated the functions and meanings of Calcutta auctions. During the latter part of the century, taverns, theatres, and auction houses were the primary locations of Anglo-Indian sociability.²³ While white town concerts and stage productions drew crowds, auctions were one of the only public entertainments where audience members were active participants. Much as theatrical performances were vital to negotiating competing ideas of Britishness in the colonies,²⁴ public bids and purchases contributed to crafting and reaffirming Anglo-Indian identity as well as envisioning the white town as a distant geography of Britain.

However, as essayists, visual artists, and auction attendees themselves reflected upon the nature of London sales, metropolitan persons simultaneously encountered increasing numbers of textual and visual representations of sales by hammer throughout the colonial world. Metropolitan disparagement of auctions as duplicitous and indecorous became intertwined with debates on imperial expansion, American slavery, colonial rule in India, and the consequent deleterious effects upon Britain. As this article suggests, detractors of EIC servants deemed auctions not as essential to maintaining civility and Britishness abroad. Rather, when occurring in India, public outcries were rituals associated with unscrupulous 'nabobish' enrichment, orientalization through sociability with South Asians, and the uprooting of traditional authority in both India and Britain. In fact, when brought to trial in 1788, Hastings's accusers alleged that he used 'corrupt auction[s]' to violate property rights, rob India's elite, and upend the region's proper social ordering.²⁵ The use of sales by hammer to plunder India also suggested nabobs' desire to displace the landed elite and rule as oriental despots at home by using their ill-gotten Asiatic riches to place the highest bid.

I

As the eighteenth century progressed, the piecemeal fragmentation of the Mughal empire provided the Company with opportunities to forge alliances with South Asian bankers, merchants, military leaders, and newly independent politicians. Following victories at Plassey in 1757 and Buxar in 1764, the EIC transformed into a landed power controlling Bengal and other reaches of India.²⁶ As plunder, land revenues, and profits from trade flowed into the Company's coffers in the following decades, individual Britons devised ways

imported prints in colonial Calcutta, c. 1780–c. 1795', in Martin Jay and Sumathi Ramaswamy, eds., *Empires of vision* (Durham, NC, 2014), pp. 168–9; Patrick D. Rasico, 'Calcutta "in these degenerate days": the Daniells' visions of life, death, and nabobery in late eighteenth-century British India', *Journal for Eighteenth-Century Studies*, 42 (2019), pp. 27–47.

²³ Swati Chattopadhyay, *Representing Calcutta: modernity, nationalism, and the colonial uncanny* (London, 2005), p. 84.

²⁴ Kathleen Wilson, 'The lure of the other: Sheridan, identity and performance in Kingston and Calcutta', *Eighteenth-Century Fiction*, 27 (2015), p. 510; Gillian Russell, *The theatres of war: performance, politics, and society, 1793–1815* (Oxford, 1995).

²⁵ Burke, 'Speech on opening of impeachment', p. 382.

²⁶ C. A. Bayly, *Indian society and the making of the British empire* (Cambridge, 1988), pp. 48–55.

to fill their own pockets with rupees. The EIC permitted its officers in India to supplement their salaries through private trade in textiles, tea, and other goods. Deceitful and illicit endeavours, however, were often more lucrative. Several officers became conspicuously wealthy through embezzlement, malfeasant moneylending, or by defrauding Indians.²⁷ While these 'Asiatic' fortunes received metropolitan scrutiny and condemnation in the final decades of the century,²⁸ the EIC and individual Anglo-Indians used their profits to forge a British sector of Calcutta. In addition to the construction of European-like classicized monuments and architecture, the display and use of 'Europe goods' enabled Anglo-Indians to maintain a sense of Britishness and have the material comforts of home.²⁹ As hubs of material circulation, import auctions and estate sales aided Anglo-Indians in envisioning themselves as living in a subcontinental British geography. Yet, rather than allowing Anglo-Indians to define themselves against Indians through material practices, auctions disbursed goods throughout the city. This movement of items threatened to eliminate material distinctions and could highlight the intertwined nature of the white and black towns.

During the last half of the century, high demand for British imports resulted in 'the several daily auctions in Calcutta' becoming an important arena of sociability and material circulation for Anglo-Indians and South Asians alike.³⁰ For most of the approximately one thousand EIC servants and other Europeans living throughout Calcutta, their plan was to amass riches quickly and return home.³¹ Despite uncertain fates and fortunes, Anglo-Indians did not want to succumb to the material conditions of India. Instead, they purchased household goods at auctions and Europe shops throughout their time in India. British clothing, furniture, lighting fixtures, kitchenware, texts, paper and writing instruments, artworks, and other necessities and luxuries continuously flowed into Calcutta to meet demand.³² While word-of-mouth lured bidders and spectators, auctioneers placed newspaper advertisements for sales of 'Europe goods just imported'. In August 1785, for instance, the auctioneers Williams and Lee published a notice of their upcoming sale of British clothing, toiletries, watches, 'a choice collection of books', and 'Wedgewood's black and painted teapots'.³³ Despite their frequency, white town outcries attracted crowds of Europeans and South Asians seeking goods or desiring to observe

²⁷ P. J. Marshall, *East Indian fortunes: the British in Bengal in the eighteenth century* (Oxford, 1976), pp. 110–18, 204–8.

²⁸ Tillman Nechtman, *Nabobs: empire and identity in eighteenth-century Britain* (Cambridge, 2010), pp. 12–15.

²⁹ Advertisers, merchants, and consumers applied the term 'Europe goods' to items imported from Britain or continental Europe. Eaton, 'Excess in the city?', pp. 169, 173–5.

³⁰ Williamson, *The East India vade-mecum*, II, p. 230.

³¹ Nechtman, *Nabobs*, pp. 192–3, 132–5; Suresh Chandra Ghosh, *The British in Bengal: a study of the British society and life in the late eighteenth century* (New Delhi, 1998), pp. 58–9.

³² P. J. Marshall, 'The white town of Calcutta under the rule of the East India Company', *Modern Asian Studies*, 34 (2000), pp. 309, 323–5.

³³ W. S. Seton-Karr, *Selections from the Calcutta Gazette of the years 1784, 1785, 1786, 1787, and 1788* (3 vols., Calcutta, 1864–8), I, pp. 117–18.

bidding wars. In 1789, during the auction of the EIC surveyor John Hinloch's estate, seventy-six Europeans and thirty Indians each placed winning bids.³⁴ Some attendees were merchants seeking inventory, but others were art collectors and those buying furnishings. Since Calcutta auction records never mention spectators or those outbid, the total number attending this outcry and others is indeterminable.

The material conditions of the white town, the constant circulation of European imports, and the frequency of auctions in Calcutta reflected strong demand as well as the dangers and uncertainties experienced by most Britons in India. High rates of European mortality throughout the century as well as an economic downturn starting in the 1780s caused the white town's population to be unstable and transitory. As the orientalist Henry Colebrook lamented in 1785, 'India is no longer a mine of gold; and all those whose affairs permit abandon it as fast as possible.'³⁵ The impermanence of white town life assured the rapid circulation of abundant European and pseudo-European items as Britons' abandoned possessions crossed the auction block. In November 1791, auctioneers sold the furnishings and copious artworks of the deceased lawyer, Joseph Bourdieu. While his commonplace items entered the hands of Britons and Indians for modest amounts, Bourdieu's paintings and prints – including a portrait of Bourdieu himself – realized high prices.³⁶ Company servants' tendency to live beyond their means in times of financial uncertainty resulted in frequent bankruptcy auctions. The Supreme Court clerk Nathaniel Penry Reese's lavish parties, collecting of luxuries, 'gaming, and every other species of debauchery' led to indebtedness and forced his imported book collection 'to go to the hammer' in 1797. Although magazines, pamphlets, and books were abundant in white town shops, Dring and Company's auction of these 'superbly-bound' volumes at their 'Great Room' allowed Reese 'to liquidate the debt'.³⁷ At times of financial stress, even the EIC 'exposed to sale by public auction' various goods 'at the Import Warehouse'.³⁸ Much as Company officers could oversee sales by hammer when necessary, outcries were not limited to prominent white town auctioneers.

Auctions of European, East Asian, and Indian wares occurred with varying degrees of formality and authorization at residences and commercial venues throughout the white and black towns. Public outcries occurred in houses, at the Old Court House, at Fort William, at the Company's Custom House, at specialized auction rooms, on the ports, and in Lal Bazaar and other black town mercantile spaces.³⁹ While the Company reserved the right of

³⁴ Anonymous, 'Inventory & sales of all & sundry the goods, chattels, belongings of John Hinloch', 1789, BL IOR/L/AG/34/27/11.

³⁵ Quoted in Douglas Dewar, *Bygone days in India* (London, 1922), p. 181.

³⁶ Anonymous, 'Account sale of the following effects sold by us by public auction on account of the estate of Joseph Bourdieu', 17 Nov. 1791, BL IOR/L/AG/34/27/13.

³⁷ William Hickey, *Memoirs of William Hickey, 1790-1809*, ed. Alfred Spencer (4 vols., New York, NY, 1919-25), IV, pp. 184-5.

³⁸ Quoted in W. H. Carey, *The good old days of Honorable John Company* (2 vols., Shimla, 1882), I, p. 122.

³⁹ Seton-Karr, *Selections from the Calcutta Gazette*, I, pp. 34, 48-9, 110-11, 168, 216, 240.

auctioneering at the Old Court House and the Custom House, the appointed 'vendu master' was to direct other 'sales at the Presidency'.⁴⁰ Owners of taverns, galleries, and shops, nevertheless, conducted auctions throughout the city. Among the many white town auctioneers during the last decades of the century were Bondfield, Burrell and Gould, Davidson, Dring, Duncan, Queiros, Tulloh, Williams and Lee, and Yeates.⁴¹ In addition to settling the debts and credits of the client, auction houses charged 5 per cent of the total amount generated at a sale. Enterprising auctioneers used their profits to collaborate with local investors – such as agency firms and individual European and Indian merchants – to import and sell goods directly from Britain.⁴² The prevalence of this practice resulted in newspaper articles critiquing imports of 'Europe goods to the best advantage'.⁴³ The circulation of overabundant European items alongside omnipresent Asian imitations resulted in excessive imports selling for 'thirty or forty percent' less than their expected value. These 'little ventures' oversaturated the marketplace, but auctioneers and private merchants continued to collaborate with legal and illicit shippers.⁴⁴ Smugglers and unauthorized Britons in Bengal – such as missionaries – utilized Calcutta auctions as a means of quickly profiting from illegally imported materials. Prior to the legalization of proselytization in British India in 1813,⁴⁵ Baptist Missionary Society (BMS) members relied upon secretive North American shipping networks to go to India and to circulate goods between Calcutta and Britain. Since missionaries could strategically generate income without directly taking part in commerce by auctioning goods smuggled by Americans, the BMS sent clandestine shipments of European textiles, books, and various items directly 'to the name of' William Tulloh, Gerald Hampley, and other Calcutta auctioneers.⁴⁶ These 'respectable house[s]' then conducted outcries and 'hand[ed] the proceeds' to the missionaries.⁴⁷ While this arrangement allowed missionaries to support themselves and to fund their proselytizing efforts, auctioneers certainly profited.

Auctioneers' activities extended beyond their salesrooms to bazaars, taverns, residences, and several other locations of the overlapping and interweaving white and black towns. Although Anglo-Indians headed most prominent Calcutta auction houses, Indians and other black town residents also

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, II, p. 99.

⁴¹ BL IOR/L/AG/34/27/1–23.

⁴² Natasha Eaton, *Mimesis across empires: artworks and networks in India, 1765–1860* (Durham, NC, 2013), pp. 89–90.

⁴³ Quoted in Carey, *The good old days of Honorable John Company*, I, p. 162, II, p. 66.

⁴⁴ Williamson, *The East India vade-mecum*, II, pp. 169–70.

⁴⁵ Robert Frykenberg, 'Christian Missions and the Raj', in Norman Etherington, ed., *Missions and empire* (Oxford, 2005), p. 109.

⁴⁶ Andrew Fuller to William Carey, 6 Sept. 1797, Home Office correspondence, Baptist Missionary Society Archives (BMSA), BMS missionary correspondence, Southern Baptist Historical Library and Archive (SBHLA), Nashville, TN, microfilm collection (MC) #5350, reel 20, vol. 2; Anonymous, *Periodical accounts relative to the Baptist Missionary Society* (6 vols., London, 1800–19), I, p. 487.

⁴⁷ J. C. Gotch to William Burls, 6 Aug. 1817, BMSA, BMS correspondence, box H/4, SBHLA MC #5350, reel 21.

conducted sales. In March 1786, Cachatoor Isaac oversaw the public outcry of his late brother's home north of Lal Bazaar on Armenian Street. In addition to chinaware, Indian furniture, and 'an old fashion palanqueen', this auction featured European household items, British art, and Christian icons. Several Europeans acquired goods at this sale, but Armenians, Indians, and others placed 70 per cent of all winning bids.⁴⁸ Because South Asian auctioneers occasionally oversaw the estate sales of deceased Britons who lived throughout the city, at times there could be little differentiation between white town and black town outcries. At the July 1781 estate auction 'of the late Mr. John Moore', Kirparam Doss sold sixty-five of the eighty-seven total lots to Europeans.⁴⁹ While private contract remained a prominent mode of sale in Calcutta, Anglo-Indian auctioneers disposed of homes, businesses, and other real estate along the nebulous peripheries of the white town and beyond. In April 1799, at his auction room on Tank Square, Tulloh sold the 'Bazaar at Chouringee', which included rights of rent collection for 350 shops and stalls. This property was 'bounded by General Stibbert's house on the east, by the Durrumtollah Road on the north, by the Chouringee Road to the west, and by the Juan Bazaar to the south'.⁵⁰ By passing ownership of land, homes, mercantile spaces, and goods throughout Calcutta to both European and Indian bidders, auctions highlighted how the imagined material and geographic boundaries of the black and white towns were ever-changing and illusory.

Anglo-Indian auctioneers perceived European imports as vital to their self-identification, but the considerable numbers of South Asian buyers at outcries reveal that these goods were not exclusive to the white town. The interwovenness of the black and white towns provided Britons and Indians equal opportunity to acquire land and European, pseudo-European, and Asian items at sales throughout the city. The 1788 auction of the contents of a warehouse held by 'Messrs. Redpath & Simon', where Indians placed winning bids for 55 per cent of the 378 lots, is a case in point. South Asian bidders won numerous textiles, tools, palanquins and carriages, furnishings, and European prints and paintings.⁵¹ Of the extant Bengal inventory records for the years 1777 to 1795, 301 estate and inventory auctions in Calcutta detail buyers and prices realized. For the approximately 40,325 lots up for bid, Indians and other black town residents purchased 10,091, or 25 per cent.⁵² The EIC officer Thomas Williamson claimed that in black town bazaars there were 'various scattered boutiques, appropriated entirely to the display of European articles...of every description'. These shops were run by 'a tribe of Hindu speculators, who, from attending at auctions, are enabled to make cheap purchases, and become perfectly acquainted with the qualities of

⁴⁸ Anonymous, 'Account sale of household furniture belonging to the estate of Petruse Isaac... sold by public auction at the deceased dwelling house', 14 Mar. 1786, BL IOR/L/AG/34/27/11.

⁴⁹ Anonymous, 'An account sales of sundry effects belonging to the estate of the late Mr. John Moore...sold at public outcry by Kirparam Doss', 12 July 1781, BL IOR/L/AG/34/27/2.

⁵⁰ Quoted in Carey, *The good old days of Honorable John Company*, I, pp. 138, 147.

⁵¹ Anonymous, 'Account sales of the goods & effects of Messrs. Redpath & Simon in partnership', 1788, BL IOR/L/AG/34/27/11.

⁵² BL IOR/L/AG/34/27/1-17.

every article...as have a preference in the eye of a European'.⁵³ At times, Indian merchants acquired entire shipments from Britain. In 1799, Rassoo Day 'purchased the choice investment of Mr. Benjamin Richardson' before these goods reached white town shops or auctions. Instead, Day sold these items 'at his long room in the China Bazaar'.⁵⁴ While he likely advertised these wares as imports, when items re-entered circulation at outcries, frequent loss of provenance of European imports alongside Asian imitations could threaten to nullify the material signifiers of Britishness in Calcutta.

White town residents valued identifiable British imports, but the frequent sale and circulation of European, East Asian, and Indian goods rendered most items crossing the auction block of uncertain origins. Sale catalogues and auctioneers' orations detailed the desirable features of lots, but their application of the term 'Europe' typically underscored the high quality of 'a gold Europe box' or a 'Europe damask new table cloth'.⁵⁵ To drive up prices, however, auctioneers occasionally also applied this terminology to undesirable and commonplace goods of unknown origins. Also popular in the white town were items which mainland British manufacturers tailored to subcontinental living conditions and practices.⁵⁶ Certain Asian goods, particularly hookahs, increasingly appeared at white town auctions as their use became normalized. Although newly arrived Britons were aghast at 'those stinking machines', long-term residents – such as the lawyer William Hickey – insisted 'that custom sanctioned smoking the hookah which was in common use among' Anglo-Indian women and men.⁵⁷ Since this demand encouraged British manufacturers to fabricate hookahs for export, snakes and glass bottoms appeared even in the estate sales of impoverished Britons.⁵⁸ As India provided most consumer goods to Anglo-Indians, Asian items – including artworks and curios – were ubiquitous but often of limited value at white town auctions. Numerous Company officers assembled collections of South Asian art, aged texts, and antiquities during the eighteenth century,⁵⁹ but Indian exotica was so commonplace at sales that at times even remarkable examples crossing auction blocks brought few bids.⁶⁰ As larger varieties and quantities of British wares flowed to the subcontinent, South Asian artists and craftspersons integrated, adapted, and experimented with aesthetics, materials, and forms,

⁵³ Williamson, *The East India vade-mecum*, II, pp. 168–9.

⁵⁴ Quoted in Carey, *The good old days of Honorable John Company*, I, p. 165.

⁵⁵ Anonymous, 'Account sale of the house and effects belonging to the estate of John Baptiste Mandezer', 21 May 1781, BL IOR/L/AG/34/27/2; Anonymous, 'Account sales of sundries sold at public sale...on account of the estate of C. L. Playdell', 23–5 June 1779, BL IOR/L/AG/34/27/1.

⁵⁶ Jonathan Eacott, *Selling empire: India in the making of Britain and America, 1600–1830* (Chapel Hill, NC, 2016), pp. 291–5.

⁵⁷ William Hickey, 'Article on unpublished portions of Hickey's memoirs vol. IV', BL MSS Eur F82/15.

⁵⁸ BL IOR/L/AG/34/27/1–23; Eacott, *Selling empire*, pp. 296–8.

⁵⁹ Maya Jasanoff, *Edge of empire: lives, cultures, and conquest in the East, 1750–1850* (New York, NY, 2005), pp. 6–7.

⁶⁰ See, for example, Anonymous, 'An inventory of the effects of the late John Knott of Calcutta... sold by public auction', 25 May 1792, BL IOR/L/AG/34/27/14.

resulting in the breakdown of differentiation between European and Asian material culture.⁶¹ Since emulation and circulation threatened to eliminate white town material distinctiveness, most auction lots could not receive a designation as Asian or European. While auctioneers occasionally identified a 'handsome Lucknow hookah snake', the convergence of physical attributes rendered most merely an unidentifiable smoking apparatus.⁶² Recurrent auctioning of second-hand European imports alongside Asian imitations of British wares, European emulations of Indian goods, and Indian items obfuscated many lots' nature. Since buyers usually had little guarantee as to the origins of second-hand goods origins, Calcutta outcries further diminished European imports' capacity to signify Britishness. Ultimately, as the next section details, for metropolitan critics, auctions could not grant gentility and Britishness in India, particularly given the close association of sales by hammer with corruption, theft, orientalizing, and slavery throughout reaches of the colonial world.

II

Late eighteenth-century British representations of auctions held at home and throughout the empire addressed questions of domestic luxury and consumption, British national character, the negotiation of race and class, and the nature of global expansion and imperial wealth. As Anglo-Indians attempted to craft Calcutta's white town as a polite appendage of urban Britain, metropolitan politicians, essayists, artists, and social commentators condemned returned Company officers as an oriental intrusion in Britain.⁶³ Prior to the passage of the 1773 Regulating Act, London experienced 'a deluge of disputes and pamphlets on the late events' in Bengal, illuminating nabobs' character.⁶⁴ Although the image of the Anglo-Indian remained in flux throughout the Georgian period,⁶⁵ nabobs typically appeared in literature, theatre performances, and visual productions as reprehensible figures who sprang 'from the lowest of the earth' and became 'rich with the spoils of Asiatic provinces'. In addition to living 'like so many Eastern princes', once back home they spared 'no sums in corrupting the morals and principles of the people'.⁶⁶ According to their detractors, nabobs' ill-gotten wealth, adopted subcontinental cultural norms, and debauched activities made them much like oriental despots in India and Britain.⁶⁷ While elites feared that nabobs' 'enormous crimes committed in that part of the world' could illuminate parallels to

⁶¹ Eaton, *Mimesis across empires*, pp. 8–14.

⁶² Anonymous, 'Account sales of sundries belonging to the estate of Mr. Heatley, Esq...sold by us by public auction', 30 Sept. 1794, BL IOR/L/AG/34/27/17.

⁶³ Jasanoff, *Edge of empire*, pp. 48, 81–4.

⁶⁴ Horace Walpole to Lady Hertford, 11 Mar. 1764, in W. S. Lewis, ed., *Walpole correspondence* (48 vols., New Haven, CT, 1937–83), XXXVIII, pp. 344–5.

⁶⁵ Christina Smylitopoulos, 'Portrait of a nabob: graphic satire, portraiture, and the Anglo-Indian in the late eighteenth century', *RACAR: revue d'art canadienne/Canadian Art Review*, 37 (2012), pp. 13–15.

⁶⁶ 'A.B.C.D.', *Town and Country Magazine*, 2 (London, 1770), p. 587; 'Socrates', *Town and Country Magazine*, 5 (London, 1773), p. 411.

⁶⁷ Nechtman, *Nabobs*, pp. 12–16, 80–91.

domestic greed and immorality,⁶⁸ the scrutiny of inflowing cash extended to a raft of individuals enriched through imperial ventures. Indeed, many persons crowding metropolitan auction rooms and appropriating materials of eliteness were those amassing Asiatic fortunes and those profiting from American slavery.⁶⁹

Returned EIC officers, seaborne merchants, and West Indian planters received criticism as dangerous upstarts injecting the metropolitan upper ranks with an aura of immorality forged in imperial milieus. While Caribbean land ownership was not as outrightly condemned in popular literature, there were many comparisons between plantation owners and Anglo-Indians as cruel exploiters of colonized persons. Planters appeared in print as ‘the tyrants of their slavish blacks’ who would ‘endeavour to reduce the white to the same condition by an aristocracy’.⁷⁰ According to Granville Sharp, ‘every petty planter, who avails himself of the service of slaves, is an arbitrary monarch, or rather a lawless *Bashaw*’.⁷¹ Rumours spread that Anglo-Indians likewise desired to enslave Britons by ruling at home as oriental despots.⁷² Mounting scrutiny of the Atlantic slave trade following the 1772 Somerset case and the 1783 Zong trial pushed abolitionists to publish descriptions of the horrors of the middle passage, the brutalities of slavery, and the ‘mortifying circumstance[s]’ of slave auctions. These auction narratives built upon earlier anti-slavery accounts detailing the ‘cruel instances’ of commodifying Africans.⁷³ Yet, they also tapped into long-standing rumours of indentured and impoverished Britons being sold by hammer in the Americas.⁷⁴ Writers ranging from anonymous essayists to Benjamin Franklin decried colonial auctions as unscrupulous and associated with the sale of enslaved persons.⁷⁵ As early as the 1760s, abolitionists warned metropolitan readers that ‘the uncivilized customs which disgrace our own colonies’ – such as slavery and the auctioning of people – were seeping into Britain. According to Sharp, American colonists not only brought enslaved persons with them to ‘the free city of London’, but were increasingly advertising the sale of people in metropolitan newspapers. In 1767, for instance, a ‘poor [enslaved] servant was put up to sale by public auction together with the effects of his bankrupt

⁶⁸ Johann Archenholz, *A picture of England: containing a description of the laws, customs, and manners of England* (London, 1789), p. 22; Rasicco, ‘Calcutta “in these degenerate days”’, p. 31.

⁶⁹ Brian Learmount, *A history of the auction* (Iver, 1985), pp. 29–31.

⁷⁰ Nechtman, *Nabobs*, pp. 156–7; *Daily Gazetteer*, 2 Nov. 1767, quoted in Kathleen Wilson, *The sense of the people: politics, culture, and imperialism in England, 1715–1785* (Cambridge, 1995), p. 275.

⁷¹ ‘*Bashaw*’ or pasha was a term for a Turkish official. Sharp, *A representation of the injustice and dangerous tendency of tolerating slavery*, p. 82.

⁷² Eacott, *Selling empire*, p. 202, 209.

⁷³ Thomas Cooper, *Letters on the slave trade* (Manchester, 1787), p. 16; Thomas Clarkson, *The substance of the evidence of sundry persons on the slave-trade* (London, 1789), pp. 16, 54.

⁷⁴ Bernard Bailyn, *Voyagers to the west: a passage in the peopling of America on the eve of the Revolution* (New York, NY, 1986), pp. 174, 324–5.

⁷⁵ American auctioneers attracted audiences by selling land, buildings, artworks, furnishings, and enslaved individuals at a single ‘vendu’. T. H. Breen, *The marketplace of revolution: how consumer politics shaped American independence* (Oxford, 2004), pp. 141–3; Joseph Roach, *Cities of the dead: circum-Atlantic performance* (New York, NY, 1996), pp. 211–15.

master'. For Sharp and other abolitionists, colonial auction practices – which revealed Britons' embrace of 'the customs of uncivilized nations' – threatened to become normalized within London's own auction rooms.⁷⁶ These representations dissuaded metropolitan persons from perceiving colonial auctions as commercial performances allowing Britons in every corner of the empire to replicate life at home. Rather, since sales of enslaved persons occurred into the nineteenth century,⁷⁷ colonial auctions – whether held in the Americas or Calcutta – delineated the difference between metropolitan society and corrupted imperial milieus.

As public spectacles revealing the interwovenness of the black and white towns, Calcutta auctions met with metropolitan disparagement and ridicule as sites where Anglo-Indians revealed their debauched nature, orientalizing, and desire to subjugate persons at home and abroad. Rather than rituals of affirming Britishness, sales by hammer engendered nabobish transformation. Metropolitan newspaper coverage of white town auctions typically detailed the economics of shipping investments and 'sales of the Company's outcry goods'.⁷⁸ Visual satire, however, highlighted subcontinental sales as corrupt practices that demarcated the white town as distinct from Britain.⁷⁹ In May 1786, lively parliamentary and popular debate surrounding Edmund Burke's calls for the impeachment of Warren Hastings impelled the London engraver James Gillray to publish *A sale of English-beauties, in the East Indies* (Figure 1).⁸⁰ While all of the multifarious contemporary readings of this image are not knowable, several studies have identified *A sale of English-beauties* as lampooning the transnational British marriage market. This image ridiculed British women arriving in Calcutta in search of wealthy husbands as being akin to prostitutes.⁸¹ Moreover, this scene reflected and inspired narrative elements of contemporary literature and stage productions articulating metropolitan anxieties concerning interracial sociability, sexuality in imperial geographies, and the economic dominance of China throughout much of Asia.⁸² This print also tapped into uncertainties and apprehensions of the auction at home and throughout the empire to vilify Hastings and his

⁷⁶ Sharp, *A representation of the injustice and dangerous tendency of tolerating slavery*, pp. 89–90, 104–5.

⁷⁷ BL IOR/L/AG/34/27/1–23; H. E. Busteed, *Echoes from old Calcutta* (London, 1908), pp. 134–5.

⁷⁸ *Middlesex Journal*, 13–15 Oct. 1773.

⁷⁹ Satirical prints identified nabobs and imperial geographies as unlike peoples and spaces of Britain. Smylitopoulos, 'Portrait of a nabob', pp. 11–12.

⁸⁰ Mary Dorothy George, *Catalogue of political and personal satires preserved in the Department of Prints and Drawings in the British Museum* (12 vols., London, 1870–1954), VI, pp. 336–7.

⁸¹ Tim Fulford, 'Getting and spending: the orientalizing of satire in Romantic London', in Steven E. Jones, ed., *The satiric eye: forms of satire in the Romantic period* (London, 2003), p. 16; John C. Leffel, "'Where woman, lovely woman, for wealth and grandeur comes from afar": representations of the colonial marriage market in Gillray, Topham, Starke, and Austen', in Monika Class and Terry F. Robinson, eds., *Transnational England: home and abroad, 1780–1860* (Newcastle, 2009), pp. 211–16; Kathleen Wilson, *The island race: Englishness, empire, and gender in the eighteenth century* (London, 2003), p. 98.

⁸² Daniel O'Quinn, *Staging governance: theatrical imperialism in London, 1770–1800* (Baltimore, MD, 2005), pp. 291–2; David Worrall, 'Chinese Indians: a James Gillray print, Covent Garden's *The loves*



Figure 1. James Gillray, *A sale of English-beauties, in the East Indies* (1786). Height: 43 centimetres; width: 54 centimetres. Courtesy of The Lewis Walpole Library, Yale University (Call Number: Drawer 786.05.16.05).

fellow Anglo-Indians. Among the attendees of the featured Calcutta outcry are Company officers, European sailors and soldiers, Indian men of various ranks, and light-complexioned European women. In addition to depicting interlaced British and Indian social spheres, this heterogeneous assemblage suggested to viewers that white town sales bore resemblances to American auctions. By featuring this outcry on a white town dock, Gillray placed this image in dialogue with contemporary accounts of colonial coastlines as locations of trauma for those commodified by British imperial agents.⁸³

Front and centre in *A sale of English-beauties* is a European woman who is the unwitting victim of degenerate nabobs. The auctioneer's gestures indicate that this woman clad in a flowing gown is the current lot up for bid. Two men wearing European and Asian clothing stand on either side of her, inspecting her body as though she were livestock or an imported Europe good. Gillray leaves ambiguous whether the bespectacled and moustachioed man wearing a turban is an Indian attendee or a European whose time in the subcontinent had

of Bengal, and the eighteenth-century Asian economic ascendancy', *European Romantic Review*, 19 (2008), pp. 105–6.

⁸³ Catherine Molineux, 'Making the middle passage: maritime dimensions of abolitionist debate', in Carole Shammas and Peter Mancall, eds., *Governing the sea in the early modern era* (San Marino, CA, 2015), pp. 275–81.

rendered his complexion and dress similar to those of Indians.⁸⁴ The physique of the man to her right encapsulates the stereotype of the slovenly and indolent nabob. The presence of a rolled-up piece of paper – which reads ‘Instructions for the Governor General’ – in this man’s pocket suggests that he is possibly a diminutive, rotund amalgam of Lord Cornwallis and Warren Hastings. Gillray underscores EIC officers’ abandonment of British interests and values by juxtaposing the nabob’s actions with the disregarded orders from the directors in London. Mocking white town excess and indebtedness, Gillray places near the back of the crowd a large wooden scale that compares the weight of one woman to a barrel labelled ‘Lack of Rupees’.⁸⁵ Metropolitan satires depicted nabobs as ‘turning Turk’ and desiring Indian and European concubines,⁸⁶ but the audience does not place a single bid. To the right of the crowd, a number of distraught women retreat into a warehouse door crowned with a sign reading ‘unsaleable goods from Europe’ that are ‘to be returned by the next ship’. The rejection of these women illustrates nabobs’ eschewal of Britishness, disregard for European women as akin to property, and acclimation to Indian cultural norms.

Gillray’s vision of Calcutta auctions suggested to viewers both the non-British nature of the white town and nabobs’ propensity to despotic cruelty through enslavement. Despite Hastings’s and Cornwallis’s opposition to the slave trade,⁸⁷ a nearly nude African child catches the governor general within a parasol’s oriental umbra. Images of African servants shading their masters were not uncommon in early modern European portraiture. Yet, for late eighteenth-century British viewers, a parasol located a scene somewhere dissimilar to Britain in the exotic orient.⁸⁸ While this African child’s presence also underscores the scene’s similarity to American slave sales, the auctioning and rejection of numerous British women suggests the grand scale of nabobs’ wrongdoings. The malicious treatment of women in *A sale of English-beauties* revealed to the metropolitan eye how EIC officers may have left home as Britons, but their pursuit of imperial fortunes led them to disavow national interests, take on colonial norms, and consistently betray British and Indian trust.

In addition to suggesting that European imports only abetted Anglo-Indian lifestyles in an oriental white town, Gillray’s caricature warned viewers of nabobs infiltrating London auctions. Overseeing this sale is a thin auctioneer standing near an improvised podium and parcels containing scandalous items up for bid. The podium is labelled ‘Mrs. Philips (the Original Inventory) of Leicester Fields, London’, which was a manufacturer of contraceptive devices, quack medicines, and other disreputable wares. Beneath the

⁸⁴ Worrall, ‘Chinese Indians’, p. 107.

⁸⁵ ‘Lack’ is a play on words. In South Asian numbering systems, ‘lakh’ means 100,000.

⁸⁶ Fulford, ‘Getting and spending’, pp. 14–16.

⁸⁷ Amal Kumar Chattopadhyay, *Slavery in the Bengal presidency, 1772–1843* (London, 1977), pp. 22–3, 157–9.

⁸⁸ Benjamin Schmidt, ‘Collecting global icons: the case of the exotic parasol’, in Daniela Bleichmar and Peter Mancall, eds., *Collecting across cultures: material exchanges in the early modern Atlantic world* (Philadelphia, PA, 2011), pp. 31–57.

auctioneer sit crates containing salacious literature, such as *Crazy tales*, *Pucelle*, *Birchini's dance*, *Female flagellants*, *Fanny Hill*, and *Moral tales*. Lining the lower border of the image are barrels filled with 'Leake's Pills', which had associations with prostitution and venereal disease treatment.⁸⁹ In addition to intimating that the depicted British women were akin to courtesans, this constellation of erotic and offensive literature and other scandalous goods suggests that nabobs only imported the worst elements of Britain and would one day return home after years of subcontinental debauchery. Indeed, what would prevent these reprehensible enslavers of Indians and Britons alike from acting in an equally obscene manner at London auctions? Although the famed London orator never set foot in India, Gillray crafted a gaunt, foppish vision of James Christie as the auctioneer addressing the audience.⁹⁰ His presence suggests that this scene could also represent sales at home crowded with nabobs. While this satire channelled metropolitan disparagement of auctions – both in London and in Bengal – as scenes where Britons could degenerate into nefarious 'Asiatics', it also suggested that the EIC employed outcries as tools of subjugation and exploitation in India. As Gillray's farcical vision of white town outcries foretells, the British public would learn of the injustices Hastings and his fellow nabobs inflicted in India and Britain through auctions.

III

Decades before the Hastings trial (1788–1795) cast greater popular scrutiny on Company officers' corruption and misrule of Bengal, British elites were appalled by nabobs' use of sales by hammer to acquire land, luxuries, and other markers of status at home. By the 1770s, metropolitan publications, stage performances, and gossip detailed nabobs' Asian riches and their staggering bids at auctions. Some observers feared that the rupees lining nabobs' pockets would dwarf domestic land-based wealth, dislodge the traditional elite from their social position, and make fine artworks and other status symbols available only to the nouveau riche.⁹¹ In November 1771, for instance, the politician and auction aficionado Horace Walpole noted the expected value of 'Mr. Hamilton's Correggio'. According to Walpole, this painting was 'divine – and so is the price; for nothing but a demi-god or a demi-devil, that is a nabob, can purchase it'.⁹² The inflation of prices was not limited to single items sold privately or at auction. Rather, as nabobs became fixtures of the metropolis late in the century, they 'starved millions in India by monopolies and plunder, and almost raised a famine at home...by their opulence'.⁹³ According to one anonymous writer, 'these eastern plunderers, who can afford to pay double for all kinds of provisions,...have them constantly in preference to their poor

⁸⁹ Richard Godfrey, *James Gillray: the art of caricature* (London, 2001), p. 66.

⁹⁰ George, *Catalogue of political and personal satires*, VI, p. 337.

⁹¹ Nechtman, *Nabobs*, pp. 165–6.

⁹² Horace Walpole to Horace Mann, 17 Nov. 1771, in Lewis, ed., *Walpole correspondence*, XXIII, p. 350.

⁹³ Walpole to Mann, 9 Apr. 1772, in Lewis, ed., *Walpole correspondence*, XXIII, p. 400.

neighbours'.⁹⁴ As the fictitious Mrs Racket complained in Hannah Cowley's 1780 stage production *The belle's stratagem*, 'the nabobs and their wives outbid one at every sale'.⁹⁵ Since nabobs' exorbitant bids revealed their ill-gotten wealth, ruthlessness, and social ambitions, critics of Anglo-Indians identified sales by hammer at home and in India as means for nabobs to displace the landed elite. Thus, when Warren Hastings faced trial for misrule and abuses of power, his accusers decried subcontinental auctions as corrupt mechanisms of conquest 'with most grievous and terrible consequences'.⁹⁶

London auctions long carried association with aspirants bidding on markers of status, but by the last decades of the century attendance by Company officers, such as 'the real nabob Lord Clive', made art and estate sales even more contentious.⁹⁷ Following the EIC's overthrow of the nawab of Bengal in 1757 and subsequent annexation of adjacent regions, Governor Robert Clive became one of the first Company officers to stir controversy by retiring to Britain with considerable wealth. Clive's *jagir* (land grant) in Bengal, spoils of war, and ties to the Indian diamond trade enabled him to purchase land and luxuries at home. By 1771, Clive had acquired mansions at Monmouthshire, Radnorshire, Shropshire, and Devonshire. His transformation from 'Clive of India' into a British elite also required him to fill his houses with fine art proving his gentlemanly sensibilities.⁹⁸ Clive's rapid and reckless spending, however, led his financial advisers to warn in 1771 that his expenditures were 'enormous, and...I reckon you have already laid out above £4,000 in pictures'.⁹⁹ London auction attendees routinely observed Clive's public bids, as well as his costly mistakes. Continental auctioneers placed prestigious, valuable items at the sale's start, but seasoned auction goers knew that at British auctions the quality of lots generally increased as the sale progressed.¹⁰⁰ Yet, during a February 1771 Christie's auction, he overpaid for nine mediocre paintings won throughout the sale.¹⁰¹ Clive's imprudent bidding even resulted in him buying outright fakes. The following April, a painting by Carlo Dolci 'sold at an auction to Lord Clive' along with 'two views of Verona by Canaletti' for the extravagant price of over 500 guineas. Soon afterwards, 'it

⁹⁴ 'To the editor of the coffee house', *Town and Country Magazine*, 16 (London, 1784), pp. 124–5.

⁹⁵ Hannah Cowley, *The belle's stratagem* (London, 1782), p. 13, quoted in Nandini Bhattacharya, *Slavery, colonialism and connoisseurship: gender and eighteenth-century literary transnationalism* (Burlington, VT, 2006), p. 100.

⁹⁶ Edmund Burke, 'The opening of impeachment, 18 February, 1788', in Marshall, ed., *The writings and speeches of Edmund Burke*, VI, p. 191.

⁹⁷ Horace Mann to Horace Walpole, 29 Oct. 1767, in Lewis, ed., *Walpole correspondence*, XXII, p. 561.

⁹⁸ Mark Bence-Jones, *Clive of India* (London, 1974), pp. 187–9, 265; Jasanoff, *Edge of empire*, pp. 36–7.

⁹⁹ Henry Strachey to Robert Clive, 23 May, 1771, BL MSS Eur G37/61/4, fos. 38–9.

¹⁰⁰ Bénédicte Miyamoto, "'Making pictures marketable": expertise and the Georgian art market', in Charlotte Gould and Sophie Mesplède, eds., *Marketing art in the British Isles, 1700 to the present: a cultural history* (Burlington, VT, 2012), pp. 227–9.

¹⁰¹ James Christie, *A catalogue of the superb...pictures collected abroad this year with great speculation and vast expense by Mr. Robert Ansell* (London, 1771), pp. 3–8. Prices and buyers in master copy at Christie's Archive, London.

came out that the two views of Verona were only copies'.¹⁰² Similarly, at a 1773 auction, Clive spent over £283 on a misattributed painting of 'Our Saviour with the Virgin and St. Joseph' supposedly by Leonardo da Vinci.¹⁰³ Such foolhardy bids revealed publicly that he 'was no judge of the value or excellence of pictures', but also the fortunes underpinning nabobs' pretensions.¹⁰⁴ Clive's public embarrassments notwithstanding, nabobs' bids generated greater metropolitan unease and derision during the last decades of the century as Company servants acquired landed estates.

Although only a fraction returned home with fortunes during the last quarter of the century, nabobs had ample opportunities to buy landed properties in Britain. Clive and Hastings famously bought estates, but several lower-ranking officers – such as Thomas Rumbold, George Pigot, and Richard Barwell – acquired country mansions.¹⁰⁵ Some returned EIC servants claimed their fortunes to be modest, but as the diplomat Gilbert Elliot remarked in 1787, 'it seemed odd to the world that so poor a man should let his wife wear jewels and ornaments as valuable as the whole of his property besides, and should bid for estates' at auction.¹⁰⁶ Country house sales dissipated the illusion of elite status and associated accoutrements as innate features of the uppermost echelons.¹⁰⁷ Christie's and other firms auctioned mansions and their contents, land, ownership of leases, and rights to collect rents. For instance, the 1787 sale of the 'valuable freehold estate, consisting of the manors of Worcester and Goldbeaters' contained houses and sixty-five lots of parcels of enclosed, cultivated land with tenants. James Christie claimed that this property's 'one thousand eight hundred acres' generates 'two thousand eight hundred pounds' in rents per annum.¹⁰⁸ Because land ownership and rights of rent collecting bore association with high social standing, such an auction constituted a virtual selling of eliteness and opportunity to participate in domestic politics. As early as 1770, William Pitt the Elder proclaimed in the House of Lords that 'the riches of Asia have been poured upon us, and have brought with them not only Asiatic luxury, but, I fear, Asiatic principles of government'. For Pitt, most alarming was that 'the importers of foreign gold have forced their way into Parliament, by such a torrent of private corruption'.¹⁰⁹

¹⁰² Horace Walpole, *Book of materials*, in Lewis, ed., *Walpole correspondence*, XXIII, p. 299.

¹⁰³ James Christie, *A catalogue of a capital and elegant collection of pictures selected from the Roman, Florentine, Lombard, and other schools* (London, 1771), pp. 1, 6. Prices and buyers in Christie's master copy.

¹⁰⁴ Robert Clive to Henry Strachey, 15 May 1771, BL MSS Eur F128/93, fos. 55–6; Jasanoff, *Edge of empire*, pp. 36–7.

¹⁰⁵ Philip Lawson and Jim Phillips, "'Our execrable banditti': perceptions of nabobs in mid-eighteenth century Britain', *Albion: A Quarterly Journal Concerned with British Studies*, 16 (1984), pp. 227–8.

¹⁰⁶ Gilbert Elliot to Lady Elliot, 3 Mar. 1787, *The life and letters of Sir Gilbert Elliot, 1st earl of Minto, 1750–1806*, edited by the countess of Minto (3 vols., London, 1874), I, p. 131.

¹⁰⁷ Richter, 'Spectacle, exoticism, and display in the gentleman's house', p. 556.

¹⁰⁸ James Christie, *Particulars and conditions of sale of a valuable freehold estate, consisting of the manors of Worcester and Goldbeaters* (London, 1787), pp. 1, 3–15.

¹⁰⁹ William Pitt, 22 Jan. 1770, in William Taylor and John Pringle, eds., *The correspondence of William Pitt, earl of Chatham* (4 vols., London, 1838–40), III, p. 405.

Detractors warned that coteries of enriched nabobs were 'particularly attentive to the purchase of all landed estates, at almost any price that is asked, in order to obtain the disposal of the boroughs, and thereby parliamentary influence'. Parliamentary seats seemed as though 'merchandise...sold to the highest bidder'.¹¹⁰ By the last decades of the century, the Whig politician Edmund Burke identified nabobs' seizure of lands in India, acquisition of British estates, and intrusion into parliament as intertwined processes of ousting the old elite.¹¹¹ Thus, as lead prosecutor in Hastings's impeachment trial, Burke spoke of the EIC's outcries in Bengal as a threat to an Indian landed interest not unlike those of France or Britain.

Throughout the trial, Hastings's accusers denounced Bengal auctions as devious practices deployed in India to seize territory, rob subcontinental elites, and destroy the rights of India's traditional landed classes. In December 1783, Burke orated in the House of Commons an account of the governor general's ruthless and reckless confiscation of property in Bengal and 'set[ting] up the whole nobility, gentry, and freeholders, to the highest bidder'.¹¹² When brought to trial before the House of Lords in 1788, Hastings faced twenty-two charges relating to abuses of Indian adversaries and allies, illegal acceptance of 'bribes', granting corrupt contracts, inciting needless violence, and confiscating and auctioning land and valuables for personal enrichment.¹¹³ Following the EIC's conquest of Bengal and defeat of Mughal forces at Buxar, in 1765 the emperor granted the Company the title of *diwan* (revenue collector) for Bengal, Bihar, and Orissa.¹¹⁴ Soon thereafter, British administrators suspected that *zamindars* (landlords) unfairly extracted exorbitant sums from peasants and underpaid taxes.¹¹⁵ Philip Francis – an EIC officer and personal enemy of Hastings – claimed that during the disastrous Bengal famine of the early 1770s, the governor general 'violently kept [taxes] up to their former standard' rather than provide relief to the populace. To prevent 'a general decay of the revenue', in 1772 Hastings seized *zamindari* lands and put them 'up to auction, and let them for five years to the highest bidder'.¹¹⁶ Rumours swirled in Britain that 'one-third of the landed property within the Company's provinces had... been under the hammer'.¹¹⁷ During the trial's opening, Burke highlighted Hastings's desire to engage in 'plunder and rapine of every sort'. He put

¹¹⁰ 'Anti-nabob', 'Memoirs of a nabob', *Town and Country Magazine*, 3 (London, 1771), p. 70; 'Sir George Crusty and Sir William Pliant, Esq', *Town and Country Magazine*, 8 (London, 1776), p. 613.

¹¹¹ Siraj Ahmed, *The stillbirth of capital: Enlightenment writing and colonial India* (Stanford, CA, 2011), pp. 143–5.

¹¹² Edmund Burke, 'Speech on Fox's India Bill', in Marshall, ed., *The writings and speeches of Edmund Burke*, V, p. 426.

¹¹³ P. J. Marshall, *The impeachment of Warren Hastings* (Oxford, 1965), pp. xiv–xv.

¹¹⁴ Bayly, *Indian society and the making of the British empire*, p. 53.

¹¹⁵ Robert Travers, *Ideology and empire in eighteenth-century India: the British in Bengal* (Cambridge, 2007), pp. 71–2.

¹¹⁶ Philip Francis, 'Extract of a minute from General Clayering, Colonel Monson, and Mr. Francis', 20 Jan. 1776, in Romesh C. Dutt, ed., *Sir Philip Francis's minutes on the subject of a permanent settlement* (Calcutta, 1901), pp. 8–9.

¹¹⁷ Williamson, *The East India vade-mecum*, II, pp. 488–9.

'demesne lands up to auction, and they were knocked down at one year's purchase, though the usual price of land in that country was ten. The real purchaser was himself.'¹¹⁸ Due to these 'pretended public auctions' held in the white town, nearly all 'proprietors were ousted of the possession of the estates' and most lands 'fell into the hands of the banyans, or principal black servants of British subjects'.¹¹⁹ While these phony outcries enriched several Anglo-Indians, Hastings's commercial agent, Krishna Kanta Nandi, afterwards 'possessed territories yielding a rent of one hundred and forty thousand pounds a year'. When 'the landed interest of a whole kingdom, of a kingdom to be compared to France, [is] set up to public auction', Burke warned, the rightful landed elite 'must bid against every usurer, every temporary adventurer, every jobber and schemer'.¹²⁰ Indeed, whether in Bengal or Europe, auctions enabled nabobs to co-opt the property of 'a nobility perhaps as ancient as...your Lordships'.¹²¹

The most explosive accusation – the 'Begums Charge' – revealed Hastings's proclivity to cruelty and theft by confiscating and auctioning elites' valuables. In the lead-up to the trial, Burke detailed the great injustices Hastings inflicted upon the Begums – the mother and grandmother of Asaf-ud-Daula, the newly crowned nawab of Awadh. In 1781, Hastings ordered their lands, 'jewels, and effects' seized and sold at 'a pretend auction in an obscure place'.¹²² Hastings's defenders insisted that this was the 'proper method' in India for recovering debts owed.¹²³ Yet, prior to the trial, EIC officers admitted that the auctioning of the Begums' property was a scheme devised by nabobs. In May 1786, Nathaniel Middleton – the intermittent EIC Resident at Lucknow – detailed before the House of Commons the Company's disposal of the Begums' jewels. Once in Company agents' possession, 'the merchants of Lucknow' purchased a portion by private contract. The former Resident, John Bristow, transported the remainder 'to Calcutta, and by order of the Council there sold [it] by public auction'. When pressed by the examiner to explain why the jewels were not auctioned in Lucknow, Middleton responded that outcries were 'a mode of sale very unusual in that country'.¹²⁴ With rhetorical flourishes and dramatic aplomb characteristic of a noted playwright and theatre-owner, Richard Sheridan elaborated upon these testimonies and reports before parliament in February 1787 and June 1788. He theatrically wove an elaborate narrative of Hastings's betrayal of the deceased nawab,

¹¹⁸ Edmund Burke, 'The trial of Warren Hastings', in *The trial of Warren Hastings, Esq. late governor-general of Bengal* (London, 1788), pp. 6–7.

¹¹⁹ Edmund Burke, 'Articles of impeachment', in Marshall, ed., *The writings and speeches of Edmund Burke*, V, p. 191.

¹²⁰ Burke, 'Speech on Fox's India Bill', p. 426.

¹²¹ Burke, 'Speech on opening of impeachment', p. 382.

¹²² Burke, 'Speech on Fox's India Bill', pp. 410–11.

¹²³ Ralph Broome, *An elucidation of the articles of impeachment preferred by the last parliament against Warren Hastings* (London, 1790), p. 141.

¹²⁴ Anonymous, 'Committee of the whole house on the articles of charge of high crimes and misdemeanors, presented to the house against Warren Hastings', in *India courier extraordinary: proceedings of parliament relating to W. Hastings* (9 vols., London, 1786–7), II, p. 140–1.

Shuja-ud-Daula, by duping Asaf-ud-Daula into robbing his own mother and grandmother to pay debts to the British. Although Shuja-ud-Daula designated the Begums as the inheritors of much of his estate, EIC administrators convinced Asaf-ud-Daula that he was the rightful recipient and should send soldiers to confiscate their valuables.¹²⁵ According to Sheridan, 'the goods taken...were sold at a mock sale at an inferior value. Even gold and jewels instantly lost their value' when crossing a white town auction block.¹²⁶ In the view of the prosecution, the EIC's 'civil policy and...military achievements were connected with and contaminated by the meanness of peddlers, and the profligacy of pirates'. Since auctions were mechanisms of plunder and conquest in India, Hastings and his cronies were nothing more than 'auctioneering ambassadors, and trading generals'.¹²⁷

IV

As Anglo-Indians attended public outcries throughout Calcutta in hopes of filling their homes with the accoutrements of Britishness, metropolitan critics derided colonial auctions as scandalous practices intimately associated with nabobish corruption, American slavery, and the displacement of landed elites. For Anglo-Indians, auctions were essential for maintaining the fantasy of living in a subcontinental British landscape. Yet, public outcries scattered material goods throughout Calcutta, which potentially nullified material distinctions between interwoven white and black town geographies. By the last quarter of the century, alarming depictions of American slave auctions, the EIC's confiscation and sale of subcontinental land, and Anglo-Indian orientalization persuaded metropolitan readers and viewers that sales by hammer throughout the colonial world could not engender Britishness and politeness abroad. Rather, public outcries were indecorous spectacles where imperial agents demonstrated the extent of their greed, excess, and cruelty, whether in Calcutta or the Americas. Furthermore, critics warned that such alarming practices could take hold in British auction houses, and lead to an absorption of corrupt colonial norms in the metropolis. After all, how could auctions aid in the crafting of British geographies when this form of sale deceived and abused racialized persons in the colonies, transformed Britons into nabobs, threatened to alter British national character, and allowed upstarts to wrench property and status from the traditional elite at home and abroad? However, as some returned Anglo-Indians experienced in Britain, auctions could further illuminate the origins of their wealth and undermine their elite aspirations.

Following his acquittal in 1795, Hastings's massive legal fees forced him to sell his London home and numerous artworks. In April 1797, Christie's held a combined auction of the artist Gainsborough Dupont's collections with several

¹²⁵ Julie Stone Peters, 'Theatricality, legalism, and the scenography of suffering: the trial of Warren Hastings and Richard Brinsley Sheridan's Pizarro', *Law and Literature*, 18 (2006), pp. 21–2.

¹²⁶ Richard Sheridan, 'Speech of R. B. Sheridan, Esq. on summoning up the evidence on the second, or Begum charge', in *The trial of Warren Hastings, Esq. late governor-general of Bengal*, p. 100.

¹²⁷ Richard Sheridan, 'Proceedings against Mr. Hastings, Feb. 7, 1787', in Henry Bohn, ed., *The speeches of the Right Honourable Richard Brinsley Sheridan* (3 vols., London, 1842), I, p. 235.

of Hastings's paintings by Anglo-Indian artists working in Calcutta during his tenure as governor general. While Dupont's pieces brought large sums, Hastings was mortified by how few bids his pictures received. After his dozens of paintings only realized a total of £125,¹²⁸ Hastings lamented that this was only 'a twentieth part of the tithe' he expected.¹²⁹ Nothing gave Hastings 'so much vexation as the disgraceful sale of pictures. [He] would rather have burnt them.' Particularly disturbing was attendees' disregard for artworks depicting South Asian people. When Tilly Kettle's portrait of Shuja-ud-Daula coupled with an Indian landscape sold for the 'mean price' of just over £4, Hastings resolved to reacquire the piece, even if it cost him more than the amount 'at which it was knocked down'.¹³⁰ Several reasons may account for why this portrait brought few bids. As mounting accounts of supposedly tyrannical Indian rulers circulated in Britain, colonial constructions of racial difference in India and beyond gained greater recognition in the metropolis.¹³¹ Thus, few attendees may have desired a portrait of an 'oriental despot'. Equally troubling for the audience may have been the association of this picture with Hastings's treachery and theft of riches in Awadh. The commissioning of portraits for the purposes of gifting among rulers in India was not an uncommon diplomatic practice during this period.¹³² However, this artwork may have appeared to the audience as both loot extracted from Awadh and a visual depiction of a prominent Indian whose family was victimized by Hastings. Therefore, who but a nabob would want such a picture upon their wall? Ultimately, as this sale underscored for Hastings, auctions could grant aspirants the accoutrements of politeness at home and abroad, but they could also strip away the materials of status and leave visible nabobish fortunes, corruption, and pretention.

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¹²⁸ James Christie, *A catalogue of a valuable collection of pictures...of the esteemed and excellent artist, Mr. Gainsborough Dupont...also a grand selection of views of India by the ingenious artist Mr. Hodges – portraits by Kettle, &c, the property of Warren Hastings* (London, 1797), pp. 6–10. Prices in Christie's master copy.

¹²⁹ Anonymous, *True Briton* (London), 14 Apr. 1797.

¹³⁰ Quoted in Charles Lawson, *The private life of Warren Hastings: the first governor general of India* (London, 1895), p. 140.

¹³¹ Dana Rabin, *Britain and its internal others, 1750–1800: under rule of law* (Manchester, 2017), pp. 4–6; Travers, *Ideology and empire in eighteenth-century India*, p. 25.

¹³² Natasha Eaton, 'The art of colonial despotism: trafficking art and sovereignty in South India, 1765–1795', *Cultural Critique*, 70 (2008), pp. 63–5.

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