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"A Hindu is white although he is black": Hindu Alterity and the Performativity of Religion and Race between the United States and the Caribbean

ALEXANDER ROCKLIN

Religious Studies, Willamette University

In a New York City courtroom in 1929, Hazrat Ismet Ali, a yogi operating an organization called the Kaaba Alif Society out of Steinway Hall on 57th Street, was accused of fraud: of representing himself as an "East Indian" but in actuality being a "West Indian."[1] Ali, who identified himself as a yogi from India, had a Muslim name (as did his organization), drew on Hindu, Muslim/Sufi, Christian, and New Thought discourse and practice, and was accused in court of being a black man from the British Caribbean. In this essay I will analyze roughly five years in the enigmatic life of Ismet Ali, who lived and worked in Chicago and New York in the 1920s and was a yogi at intervals on the run from the law. Ali's story opens up a variety of avenues to explore the ineluctable interrelatedness of the performativity, and at times performance, of race and religion. Ali's is a story of transnational migration, passing, and cultural experimentation and recombination that problematizes the racial and religious purity of cultural production. But in this story, passing as what and by whom are at times unclear. The act of passing is but an extreme example of how identification operates more generally.[2] I will explore the ways in which, in the early twentieth-century United States, it was only through a performative engagement with orientalized stereotypes that East Indian "authenticity" could become legible to most Americans.

The way I narrate Ali's story of imposture, it unfolds as a mystery, but it remains a mystery. I do not want to offer straightforward answers, but to stay

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[1] "Question of 'Prophets' Identity," *Pittsburgh Courier*, 3 Aug. 1929.

[2] For even "whites" pass as white (Belluscio 2006).

with the fuzziness, the ambiguity, and indeterminacy of race and religion that are evident in Ali's various passings both between categories and across state and national/colonial borders. Questions of Ali's national, class, and racial origin brought into doubt his authenticity as Indian and Hindu (or "Hindoo"),[3] and Ali was accused on several occasions of being an impostor. As we will see, though, even "officially certified" Indians, such as the lecturer Bhagat Singh Thind, were confronted with accusations of their own Hindu imposture. I will set aside the adjudication of such accusations and instead rethink purported imposture through the lens of the performativity of religion and race.

As Judith Butler describes gender performativity in *Gender Trouble*, gender is not something we have or are, but a doing that does us. Gender is not the expression of an internal essence, but rather is constituted through performativity: a set of sedimented practices that bring the subject into being, based on naturalized norms the body has incorporated and enacts. The repetition of gendered performances gives the retroactive illusion of an inner gendered essence. One is not simply defined by gender norms into a rigid routine, though. Because gender is repeated, as the grounds for its intelligibility, as the grounds for power's very existence, it can be done otherwise. It can be reinterpreted, changed by accident, repurposed, bending but not going outside the bounds of socially defined norms and expectations.[4] Butler's understanding of gender performativity can be extended to other modes of identification, including religion and race. As Kristina Wirtz writes in her excellent work on the performance of Afro-Cubanness, our bodies, accessories, comportment, and motor skills make us "moving assemblages of signs" interpreted by ourselves and others in terms of race and religion, as well as class, gender, and sexuality, among other categories.[5]

Race, like gender, is assumed to be natural, defined biologically by what the body is on the surface and beneath the skin. Race has never simply been about biologized visible physical markers though (think of the "one drop rule"),[6] but is, like gender, enacted through a set of racializing practices that

[3] In this paper I primarily use "Hindoo" and "East Indian" to refer to the set of stereotypes and tropes that have largely shaped Americans' imagination and perceptions of Hindu-identified people and people of South Asian descent. Various groups inside and outside of India have used the terms Hindu and Hinduism to label a huge diversity of local traditions across India. If we look at the etymology in the *Oxford English Dictionary*, Hindu was a term for a particular region's inhabitants, and comes from the Persian word "hind," which was the word for the Indus River and the surrounding region of modern day Pakistan and northwestern India. "Hindu" was a catchall term. It initially meant not Muslim (when used by Muslim observers, traders, or soldiers), and then, when the British colonized the Subcontinent, not Muslim and not Christian. Under British rule, "Hindu" became a racial identifier and could label any Aryan Indian regardless of their religion. Hindu's wide semantic range blurred together the religious, the racial, and the regional.

[4] Butler 1999.

[5] Wirtz 2014: 90.

[6] Butler (2011), following Foucault, has made the point that the body in its materiality—its textures, colors, and various organs—is no less a product of power and no less constructed.

bring racial subjects into being. Race is imposed, learned, and continually (re)produced. These performative repetitions give the retroactive illusion of an inner racial essence.[7] Religion, on the other hand, is often assumed to be somehow beyond the body or nature, supernatural, often defined by an inner state, an experience of something transmundane, which is then expressed in speech and action. In thinking about religious passing, or the performativity of religion, we are looking at humans speaking and acting: a human doing of religion through such things as dress, bodily comportment, and aesthetic and gustatory habits, which produce and shape inner states and experiences, but that are themselves also shaped by and shape other modes of identification such as race and gender.[8] Ismet Ali's case compels us to go beyond independent analyses of the performativity of religion or race and think about the ways in which racial and religious identifications are interrelated and mutually dependent, and also how stereotypes impose constraints on, but also importantly provide different possibilities for, racial religious passing, and the kinds of work it can do.

We might think about the broader global context of Ali's passings and the religious/racial accusations against him in terms similar to what Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley, drawing from Fajardo, has called "transoceanic crosscurrents": the confluences of peoples—enslaved, indentured, colonized, and free, violently thrown together by processes of empire-building and colonization—which result in the radical (re)making of racialized, gendered, classed, sexualized, and we might add to Tinsley's list "religionized" selves.[9] Tinsley, expanding on Paul Gilroy's "black Atlantic," looks at the intersections of Atlantics both queer and black. However, the crosscurrents that are under analysis here, with the case of the yogi Ismet Ali, require an even wider lens. They are perhaps more usefully imagined as what Lisa Lowe has referred to as "the intimacies of four continents":[10] the bringing together of African, European, and Asian peoples in the Americas, through the global currents of the Atlantic world, including the black Atlantic, as well as currents of a "brown" Atlantic,[11] Indian oceanic flows coming into the Caribbean and U.S. seaboard. The latter

[7] On the performativity of race, see Rottenberg 2003; and Ehlers 2012.

[8] For a rethinking of Butler with regards agency and the performativity of religion and gender, see Mahmood 2005. Rana, in his work on the racialization of Muslims in the South Asian labor diaspora, argues that racial and religious passings have been mutually imbricated since the emergence of the race concept (2011: 36).

[9] Tinsley 2008: 192.

[10] Lowe 2006.

[11] Gopinath discusses the interconnected, global, South Asian diasporic communities as a "brown Atlantic" (2005: 69–70). On the limitations of Gilroy's formulation of the "black Atlantic" (1993) for understanding South Asian diasporic cultures, see Gopinath 1995. I am unsure about this use of the "color" of the water to describe these huge and complex cultural assemblages that at times are difficult to pick apart. The proliferating "Atlantics" and other chromatic regions are fascinating but run the risk of eliding their interconnections, the ways in which various proposed "Atlantics" run awash with one another, waves lapping over waves. For a reflection on the twenty years

were the result of, first, the unfree migration of Indian indentured laborers into the Atlantic World, and then late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Indian migration to the United States. Included among these brown Atlantic migrants were yogis and swamis of various kinds, both middle-class lecturers like Swami Vivekananda and, in the Caribbean, more "sinister" sadhus, subaltern itinerant healers wearing chains and ash, who were at times arrested for *obeah* or African witchcraft.[12]

Out of these transoceanic crosscurrents yoga emerged as what Joseph Alter has called an "alternative global modernity,"[13] produced in rhizomatic fashion from the continued experimental exchanges in physical culture, science, and philosophy between India, Europe, and the Americas. The postural yoga that is popular today arose from this continual exchange only in the early twentieth century, as physical culture regimes from Europe were articulated with neo-Hindu yoga discourse produced by cultural activists, many of them newly fluent in the transnational cosmopolitan idiom of "Guru English."[14] Yet the discourse and practice of yoga was not only a product of Hindu-identified, middle-class Indians. Peoples of Indian and African, as well as European descent, Hindus, Muslims, and Christians in the turn-of-the-twentieth-century United States and Caribbean were taking up such transnational cultural forms, reimagining and embodying them in surprising ways for their own purposes. In the United States, they became fodder for the production of Euro-American Orientalist stereotypes of "East Indian" and "Hindoo" swamis and yogis, as well as the diffused productions of "American Metaphysical Religions"[15] and esotericism. Concurrently, through these popular orientalizing prisms, the yogi became a model of self-making for African Americans and other subalterns.

The figure of the swami, from its arrival in the early 1890s with the tour of Vivekananda onward, had a major impact on how Americans did and could imagine Indians from "the East." Yet the ways in which yogis presented themselves and their ideas were also shaped to meet certain American expectations, desires, and fears. These subtly shaped one another. "Hindoo" tropes and Indian identities in the United States were produced through complex and recursive loops of (highly asymmetrical) interactions between peoples of European, Asian, and African descent. These were informed also by the flows of colonial knowledge and subaltern discourse and practice carried through the

since *The Black Atlantic* that provides an overview of Gilroy's contributions and the state of play of the rainbow Atlantics, see Palmié n.d. (forthcoming).

[12] On Indian ascetic healers, *obeah*, and the politics of the category "religion" in colonial Trinidad, see Rocklin 2015.

[13] Alter 2009: 106.

[14] Singleton 2010; De Michelis 2005. On "Guru English," see Aravamudan 2006.

[15] Albanese 2007.

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British Empire and across the variously colored Atlantics. These stereotypes became models for orientalized styles of dress and the habituating of spiritualized comportments and dispositions, exemplified in the early twentieth century by yoga and the yogi. Across reified racial, class, and religious lines people donned turbans and struck pious yogic poses for wealth, self-improvement, and health, and to more easily and safely navigate the U.S. racial order. Racialized, spiritualized East Indian performances in the United States informed one another. This essay employs the case of Ismet Ali, the small-time yogi who was thrown about amidst these transformative transoceanic convergences, to look at ways in which peoples of Indian, African, and European descent imagined and embodied the type of the yogi or swami in various ways and to various effects, and to examine what resulted from their racial and religious performative passings.

The essay's first section introduces Ismet Ali in Chicago and explores the early accusations that he was an impostor. This will allow me to analyze the stereotypes of the "Hindoo" in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century United States and to explore the American construction of Indian gender, sexuality, race, and religion. The next section follows Ali in New York, situates him with Christian, Sikh, and Hindu yogis working in New York City at the time, and ends with another accusation of racial religious impropriety. I then turn to an analysis of racial passing, African American Hindu "impostors," and the complexities of racial and religious performativity. The penultimate section follows Ali further afield, across the routes of the brown Atlantic, and traces yet another of the byways of transcultural East Indian identity. I conclude by asking what Hindu impostors might tell us about the imposture of religion.

"SINISTER YOGIS" IN AMERICA

Sheik Ghulam Ismet Ali showed up in Chicago in 1925 teaching mysticism, breathing exercises, and what one newspaper several years later described as (perhaps somewhat euphemistically) "weird contortions."[16] In this period, postural yoga as we know it today was still in the process of emerging and had a strong stigma attached to it,[17] while membership in Vedanta societies in the United States was on the rise in the second half of the 1920s.[18] Ali had set up a studio on North Clark Street where he attracted a number of followers, including one Mrs. Myrtilla Twitchell of the Lincoln Square neighborhood on Chicago's north side. Apparently, Ali claimed that through his breathing exercises and the so-called contortions (perhaps postural yoga or some other form of physical culture) he could alleviate a variety of bodily ills, and Twitchell

[16] "On the Trail of a Wanted 'Sheik,'" *Port of Spain Gazette*, 21 Nov. 1930.
[17] Singleton 2010: 80.
[18] Jackson 1994: 108.

reportedly suffered from chronic hay fever. After attending a series of Ali's lectures that she had seen advertised in the newspaper, Twitchell paid him $200 for personal instruction in such methods.

The breathing technique he prescribed to Twitchell involved alternately closing off one nostril and breathing deeply through the other, holding the breath, exhaling, and following the same routine with the other. His course also included "a series of contortions." After five or six lessons with Ali his techniques had not alleviated Twitchell's symptoms and she also heard allegations that he had been a busboy and waiter. She went to the state's attorney to lay a charge of fraud against Ali, a raid followed on his studio, and he fled the state.[19] It is unclear what exactly Twitchell, the state's attorney, or the police thought they knew about Ali, his lecture and exercise regime, or his life story, beyond that he was somehow misrepresenting himself and had worked some menial jobs. It seems unlikely, for example, that Twitchell or employees of Chicago's criminal justice system would have known that the name Sheik Ghulam Ismet Ali would be identified in India as Muslim rather than Hindu. Ali's name and titles suggest he was drawing on Islam, perhaps Ahmadi Islam, in his exoticizing self-presentation in Chicago. Sheikh is a Muslim honorific that, significantly as we will see, can be a Sufi title. Ghulam is part of the name Mirza Ghulam Ahmad, the leader of the Ahmadiyyat, a controversial South Asian Muslim group that proselytized from the early 1920s in Chicago and the West Indies.[20]

For all the sensational news reports and allegations, Ali's program in Chicago sounds fairly standard for yogis or swamis in the early twentieth-century United States. For instance, forms of alternate nostril breathing are a regular part of modern yoga practice, part of *prāṇāyāma*, a breathing technique meant to clear the channels (*nāḍi*) of the subtle or yoga body through which life force is said to flow.[21] Variations of this have been prescribed in the United States from Swami Vivekananda onward.[22] It was also described (and prescribed) in detail in American esoteric publications like those of New Thought or the works of L. W. de Laurence, which were published in Chicago and were popular across racial lines throughout the Americas and West Africa.[23]

Just as there was much typical in Ali's work as a yogi, so too the newspaper's formulation of the accusations against him echo a set of the stereotypes typically associated with yogis in American Orientalist discourse. In the United States, Asian men were often portrayed as bringing questionable moralities and deviant sexualities into the country,[24] though how such stereotypes

[19] "On the Trail of a Wanted 'Sheik'"; "Fleeing Sheik of Ali," *Chicago Daily News*, 24 Oct. 1930.
[20] Nance 2009: 241–42.
[21] Alter 2009: 98.
[22] See Vivekananda 1913 [1896].
[23] E.g., de Laurence 1915.
[24] Shah 2005: 704.

were articulated varied with context.[25] During this era the stereotype of the South Asian swami, decked out in a turban and flowing robes, suggested someone both "spiritual" but also sexually predatory toward white women.[26] The narrative ran that the "Hindoo" mystic preyed on an innocent American woman who was taken in by the yogi's charms and absurd teachings. But he was exposed and his teachings proved false and ineffective, his obscene, "weird contortions" were ultimately blocked as unwanted (often sexual) advances, and his identity revealed to be false. In the United States the yogi, beginning with Swami Vivekananda in the 1890s, simultaneously held an exotic allure and repulsion for American audiences.[27]

The press was fascinated by visiting Indian lecturers and portrayed them as strange holy men with bizarre ideas and dress and a proliferation of American female admirers, while at the same time there emerged a vocal critique of yogis and these female followers. When Vivekananda first toured the United States he was advertised to Americans as the "Indian Rajah" and "Hindoo Rajah" who would "wear his native costume" during lectures.[28] Vivekananda was clearly very aware of his appearance and what Americans wanted and expected from him as an East Indian, and he did not disappoint. There was a great deal of attention to his dress, with sensuous descriptions in the papers, particularly of his "gorgeous orange," "lemon-colored," or red turbans. One account of a lecture he gave in Brooklyn described him vividly: "On his head was a turban of white silk, which set off to advantage the swarthy complexion of his cleanly shaven face."[29] In South Asia, whether or how one donned a turban or other headgear varied with time and place and was one mode of religious, social, and linguistic identification. For Americans, the turban more generally (or more vaguely) meant "the East," and was read as enticing but also threatening. It became a powerful metonym for anything "oriental." As the yogi's turban was silky, so were his appearance and personality, and, it was repeated over and again in the press, women noticed.

There was outrage and fear over Indian yogis' possible intimate influence over white American women. Mabel Daggett, in her 1912 article "The Heathen Invasion of America," wrote that when women studied yoga it led to "domestic infelicity and insanity and death." She also criticized yogis' "gorgeous robes," which they donned, she argued, to outdo the simplicity and humility of American ministers.[30] The true danger of the teachings of "the Orientals,"

[25] Ibid.: 711–15.
[26] Nance 2009: 207–10.
[27] Unitarians and Transcendentalists, among others, were fascinated with Hinduism, including yogis, earlier in the century (Weir 2011).
[28] Prashad 2000: 34.
[29] *Swami Vivekananda and His Guru* 1897: iv.
[30] Daggett 1912: 210.

she argued, was not idol worship but "the worship of men. The guru is the real idol."[31] Yogis were portrayed in white media as wily, slick, and chameleonic, gaining American women's attention and exerting undue influence with their mystic teachings, exotic good looks, and irresistible sartorial stylings. Themes of religious invasion and sexual/racial violation were repeated in polemics. One author in 1914 wrote of "insidious emissaries of the East" who had "already *penetrated* our body politic."[32] The "penetration" of the society by the Indian lecturer played off and helped to inculcate fears of sexual mixing between immigrants and American women. And the possibility existed, it was feared, that even if such "insidious emissaries" were intercepted, their slyness and surreptitious changeability would only lead them to "other cities, other aliases, and other victims."[33]

The metaphors of the too-easy mixing of religions, sexes, and races were themselves mixed in such polemics. Mersene Elon Sloan was a frequent Christian critic of Theosophy, writing in the 1920s, a time when eugenics and anti-immigrant sentiment ran high and informed one another. Sloan bemoaned the invitations issued by the Parliament of Religions at the Chicago World's Fair, and what he called "conspicuous exhibitions of sex incitements" that they encouraged: "The prevalence of present-day sex debauchery is but the logical result of the welcome given by leaders of nominal Christianity to representatives of eastern cults."[34] It was argued that religious promiscuity, or what some scholars might call "syncretism," led to sexual promiscuity, playing out enduring British colonial stereotypes of Hindu excess.

Religious mixing between Hindu and Christian operated as code for racial mixing of Indian men and American women. Sloan wrote of yogis and swamis that they stooped to the "lowest crimes under pretense of serving pious ends." The yogi hypnotized his female pupils and fooled them into seeing him as "the form of Christ standing on an eminence" to forward his untoward religious and sexual admixture.[35] Such accusations and innuendos were hardly new; before the rise of modern yoga, hatha yogins were associated by European critics, and by Indian critics long before colonialism, with witchcraft, sexual perversity, deception, and fraud.[36] Ali was perceived and his activities contained through

[31] Ibid.: 214.
[32] Reed 1914: iv, my italics.
[33] Ibid.: 132.
[34] Sloan 1929: 29.
[35] Ibid.: 30–33. As we will see, a number of yogis in the United States made reference to Jesus and gave his life and teachings a reading that put him in line with their own work and that of New Thought, even portraying him as a yogi like themselves. During this same period Indian Ahmadi Muslim missionaries, practitioners of Esotericism, and groups like the Moorish Science Temple also narrated connections between Jesus and India (Nance 2002).
[36] Singleton 2010: 35, 41. See White 2009 for a genealogy of the figure of the "sinister yogi" in South Asia (from which I drew the title of this section).

these American Orientalist frames. The sexual innuendos of his "weird contortions" and his purportedly false teachings were a threat to American women, including Mrs. Twitchell, who was taken in before she discovered his true intentions and false identity and turned him over to the authorities.

BROWN GODS OF THE METROPOLIS

This same Ismet Ali, now appearing with the Islamicate honorific title "Hazrat," began speaking and teaching on the east coast as early as 1927. He seems to have appeared in Cleveland and Pittsburgh before settling in the northeast, where he stayed for several years, teaching primarily in New York. In March 1927 Hazrat Ismet Ali, described in an advertisement as "East Indian lecturer and teacher," gave a series of four public talks at the Hotel Buffalo ballroom in Buffalo, New York. An article promoting his lectures stated: "He will deal with problems of life and proffer his solution. Practical methods of mind and body training will be his theme. Many prominent persons are students of the speaker. He voices his teachings along practical and scientific lines, does not attempt to interfere with beliefs of his audience." On the same page an advertisement with an image of a bearded and turbanded Ali said, "The Great Oriental Lecturer Hazrat Ismet Ali" would speak about "The Inner Sources of Power and Harmony," as well as "How to change failure into success and contact the law of abundance."[37]

Yogis in the United States frequently articulated their teachings through a discourse of "science," including references to cosmic rays, electricity, and magnetism.[38] In translating Hindu and yogic terms into such language they proffered a new yogic modernity that was parallel to, but compatible with and at times superior to, orthodox techno-science. Joseph Alter writes that if a single word was associated with yoga in the twentieth century it was "science."[39] They also often referenced Jesus' teachings and the Bible. This is evident in the above quote from Sloan bemoaning that yogis tried to convince students they were Christ incarnate. In saying he did not interfere with his audience's beliefs, Ali was clearly aware of media depictions of yogis that connected sudden religious insight with the upturning of peoples' lives and portrayed "oriental" religions as a cover for things more nefarious. As presented by Ali, not only did yogis not "interfere" with students' "beliefs"—meaning they required no conversion from Christianity—they integrated Christianity and translated it into yogic terms.

"The Law of Abundance," mentioned in the advertisement along with methods for transforming failure into success, was a concept in the New Thought movement expounded by authors like Charles F. Haanel in his book

[37] "Ali to Commence Lectures Tonight," *Buffalo Courier Express*, 17 Mar. 1927.
[38] Thomas 1930.
[39] Alter 2009: 28.

The Master Key System, first published in 1912. This "law," according to Haanel, states that nature is essentially constituted by abundance for all, and so one can cultivate one's mind to tap into that abundance and get whatever one wants.[40] Yoga and New Thought were interwoven in U.S. cultures of alternative spirituality. Beginning with Vivekananda, Indian yogis working in the United States incorporated and reworked New Thought discourse and practice into their own.[41] In his New York lectures Ali likely promoted a program of yoga discipline that promised to train practitioners in mental focusing techniques that would allow them to get anything they set their minds to, a program that was scientifically proven and compatible with modern Christianity.

Fred Lieb, a New York sports writer with an interest in occultism, wrote an account of a series of courses he attended in 1927 given by swamis, yogis, and Hindu teachers.[42] Among those he detailed were a Christian Yogi named A. K. Mozumdar, one of the first Indians to become a U.S. citizen, who had begun preaching in the United States in the early twentieth century.[43] Coincidentally, he also described Bhagat Singh Thind, the defendant in the 1923 Supreme Court case that declared Indians ineligible for citizenship because they were not white. Thind was a Sikh who taught "karma and rebirth" and "scientific breathing" and was known to lecture on topics such as "Jazz Mania: Its Cause and Cure." He also practiced healing sessions and gave "Christ an occult interpretation" in his teachings.[44]

Lieb also described a "small man" with long black hair down to his shoulders, a "curly" beard, and "oriental" robes with "the rather complicated name of Pir O Murshid Hazrat Ismet Ali." "Master" Ali's followers reportedly claimed he was over a hundred years old. Lieb wrote that when Ali's "ascetic face lit up it actually looked like the face one sees in the paintings of Christ." He also wrote that Ali was married to his secretary, a "rather good-looking" American with "raven black hair and milk white skin" who had been ill when she met Ali but whom Ali was said to have healed through his yoga breathing and physical culture regimen.[45]

Lieb recounted that in one class Ali decried the need for publicity stunts to attract audiences in the United States, yet also elaborated on remarkable feats of which he was capable. These included having allowed journalists to put lit cigars out on his face and arms without injury, and that he once had himself buried alive for a week, which Lieb described as "the Fakir tricks of the Ganges countryside."[46] In his classes Ali called himself "a follower of Christ

[40] Haanel 1919: 114.
[41] De Michelis 2005: 121–22, 168–69.
[42] Lieb 1939: 53.
[43] Thomas 1930: 253; Howard 2006.
[44] Thomas 1930: 222.
[45] Lieb 1939: 49.

Jesus," who Ali said was also a yogi, and taught yoga breathing along with "one hundred physical exercises and secret words." The techniques he imparted included those to open the "lotus petals," or the "nine centers of the body," such as the "ida and pingala nerve passages" (the aforementioned *nāḍi*, or life force channels), and awaken of the "Kindalini [*sic*] fire at the base of the spine."[47]

Ali told his classes that he had previously taught only "young initiates of Asia," but that he thought it necessary to train people in America for the coming "great spiritual age" during which the United States would, he said, play a major role. He claimed to be the first teacher to initiate Americans into "the complete inside teachings," which could potentially be dangerous, and that he could impart in a few weeks what "a young Hindu initiate" would learn only after years of study.[48] Ali also reportedly talked to his students about their past lives.[49] Other class participants told Lieb they had dreamt of Ali before reading the advertisements for his classes and had felt compelled to take them. He also taught what he called "midnight exercise," which he told his students could be followed by unusual occurrences. "Do not be surprised if a dog or other animal walks into your room" Ali told the class, and one woman later told Lieb that she had in fact seen a "great white dog" materialize through a wall and lay down by her side during one such meditation session.[50]

Lieb wrote that Ali ended the class series with what Ali called a "baptism." This was planned to take place on a lake in northern New Jersey, but due to rain it was held at the Manhattan Church where the classes were held.[51] Ali arrived in "American clothes" and then withdrew to change into his "oriental coat of many colors," as Lieb described it. As he emerged he appeared to be in what Lieb called a trance. He carried a vial of "greenish" oil from which he pressed a drop into the foreheads of each student while reciting "Sanskrit" words. Ali told the forty-five pupils present for the baptism that this baptismal mark would now be visible to "adepts." His applications of the oil on different students varied, with a lighter or heavier touch, for longer or shorter intervals. Lieb reported these applications had an "ecstatic effect on about half the women and on several of the men." Some fell to their knees and attempted to kiss Ali's hands, muttering "Master!"[52]

What Lieb described from Ali's lectures and instructions in yoga sound similar to those of other yogis and swamis working in the United States in the 1920s. All were more or less idiosyncratic, but contained yoga and

[46] Ibid.: 50.
[47] Ibid.: 51.
[48] Ibid.
[49] Ibid.: 129–30.
[50] Ibid.: 52.
[51] Ali was apparently holding free lectures at the Manhattan Church on Broadway at 76th Street (*New York Times*, 30 July 1927).
[52] Lieb 1939: 54.

Hindu discourse and practice, New Thought and other American esotericisms, and a discourse of "science." One interesting difference here, and a change from his presentation in Chicago, is Ali's name. Pir O Murshid is a title for the head of a Sufi lineage, and also the title assumed by Inayat Khan, the musician and "universal" Sufi (i.e., without being Islamic) missionary in America.[53] A volume of poetry by Ali's devotees included many Christian references but also a few, scant Sufi ones, including one poem, "The Sufi Message," which mentions the "Beloved," a Sufi term for God.[54] The symbol on the book's cover, a one-eyed winged heart, clearly borrows and transforms the symbol Inayat Khan used for his organization, the Sufi winged heart.[55]

Ali was drawing from the symbolism and discourse of popular American Muslims like Inayat Kahn and enhancing his prestige through Islamicate honorifics that, as I have said, were likely unintelligible to his audiences as anything other than, like a turban, something "oriental." With his stories of the cigars and being buried alive, Ali simultaneously claimed an incredible capability in so-called Fakir tricks that defined popular images in the United States of what yogis, sadhus, and fakirs did, while also denouncing them as gimmicks beneath him as a true mystic. That he claimed to be a follower of Christ did not mean he was Christian (though A. K. Mozumdar did identify as Christian). What was perhaps most peculiar was Ali's practice of baptizing his students with oil and his and his students' penchant for "trance" or "ecstatic" states. Ali's work appears to have gone smoothly for a couple of years before questions and controversy again arose.

Lecturers on Hinduism and yoga in the United States included not only "Hindus" but also "Americans."[56] Yogi and swami lecturers competed, which led to accusations of inauthenticity and boundary maintenance squabbles over who was a "real" Hindu. For instance, Swami Yogananda reportedly told Wendell Thomas that another swami, one Prem Lai Adoris, "whatever else he may be, is not a Hindu."[57] In 1929, Ali ran into such trouble in New York and again faced challenges to his authenticity. In a New York courtroom the crucial question raised this time was whether he was a "West Indian or an East Indian." By this point Ali had been running his organization, the Kaaba Alif Society, from the famous Steinway Hall on West 57th Street. The Society's treasurer, John H. House, had accused Ali of being a "fake" on a number of levels. He said that Ali had come to New York from Chicago where he had worked as the valet for C. R. Eckes, a British oil-man from Caracas, Venezuela. House

[53] On Inayat Khan, see Genn 2007.
[54] Ali 1928: 71.
[55] Ibid. Khan wanted to differentiate himself from entrepreneurial yogis like Ali (Nance 2009: 217).
[56] Thomas 1930: 218. Thomas' phrasing of this suggests that Hindus were not or could not be Americans, which after 1923 was in a legal sense true.
[57] Ibid.: 219.

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reportedly testified that Ali was not "one of the master teachers of philosophy of the inner life, combining vast knowledge with the greatest simplicity," as his promotional materials claimed, but instead was a thirty-two-year-old Trinidadian. He also said that Ismet Ali's wife, Madame Ali, was not a formerly disabled woman cured through Ali's techniques and abilities, but rather the "perfectly healthy" Amber Stein from Harrisburg, South Dakota. House had first become suspicious in May of 1929 when a New York newspaper refused to run ads for Ali's courses and a "young Hindu secretary" working for Ali, SZ Abedin, had left the organization and alleged that Ali "was teaching some things not in the Hindu ritual." House began looking into Ali's past, including apparently seizing and reading a letter sent by Madame Ali's mother from South Dakota. In the end, however, Magistrate Simpson declined to charge Ali.[58]

There was much at stake in this differentiation made in court between "East" and "West" Indian. Early in the century there was what Lara Putnam has called a "circum-Caribbean migratory sphere,"[59] with continual flows of people between islands in the Caribbean and the islands and the mainland, to and between Trinidad and Venezuela, to Panama, to the United States, and back.[60] In the 1910s, British and U.S. oil concerns found oil fields in Venezuela, and the oil boom that followed drew laborers from the British Caribbean in the 1920s. This coincided with a spike in migration to the United States in the early 1920s.[61] Assuming he was not really a hundred-year-old yogi from India, Ali may have worked for a British oil executive and ridden the flow of personnel around the Caribbean and to the United States.

Caribbean immigration to the United States required a reworking of non-white ethnic identities and negotiation of new forms of racism and different racial orders.[62] The Johnson-Reed Act of 1924 put quotas on and greatly restricted immigration from British colonies.[63] Before this there had been an influx of African Caribbean immigrants, particularly into New York's Harlem, and most of them were from the Anglophone Caribbean.[64] However, significant South Asian Caribbean migration to the United States began only in the 1960s.[65] Although they were often distinguished from African Americans born in the United States (so-called "Negroes"),[66] in this period "West Indian" seems to have meant "black" in some sense. The Jamaican-born American author Wilfred Domingo wrote in the 1920s, "To the average American Negro, all

[58] "Question of 'Prophets' Identity."
[59] Putnam 2013: 21.
[60] Ibid.: 22, 26.
[61] Ibid.: 31.
[62] Watkins-Owens 1996: 28.
[63] Putnam 2013: 82.
[64] Watkins-Owens 1996: 3–4.
[65] Ibid.: 12; Roopnarine 2003.
[66] There were hierarchies of black ethnicities in the United States, with white society sometimes holding West Indians above U.S.-born blacks (Watkins-Owens 1996: 4–5, 51).

English-speaking black foreigners are West Indians."[67] So, although there was a substantial Indian Caribbean population in the southeastern West Indies, brought there as indentured laborers beginning in the mid-nineteenth century, most did not migrate during this period, and the category "West Indian" in the United States does not seem to have included the possibility of "East Indian"—a person of South Asian descent from the Caribbean.

The accusation of inauthenticity leveled against Ali appears to have included not only questions of his national identity and whether he was "really" Hindu, but also insinuations that he was "black" and passing as Hindu. Ali did have at least some black followers. For instance, the African American paper the *New York Amsterdam News* reported two pupils of Ali's were a Reverend Father Hollinsed of the African Orthodox Church and George L. Margetson of Cambridge, Massachusetts.[68] But while it may not have delegitimized Ali to have African American followers, the implication was that if he was not himself "Hindoo" by race and "East" Indian by nationality, and particularly if he was a "black" West Indian, this assumed racial/religious incompatibility would invalidate his claims to being a teacher of "philosophy of the inner life" of an Eastern variety.

Whether he was an "East" or "West" Indian, Ali was hardly the only Caribbean spiritual entrepreneur working in the United States. The Jamaican-American Harlem Renaissance writer Claude McKay wrote in his *Harlem: Negro Metropolis* that he saw Caribbean spiritual practitioners "promote themselves as numerologists, magicians, oraculists, metaphysicians, or plain spiritualists. But under the high-sounding titles they are the same old delvers in West Indian obeahism and voodooism."[69] Journalist and Garveyite Edgar Grey wrote that Harlem was a melting pot where "East" and "West" Indians, African Americans and Africans, all interacted and even intermarried.[70] In another article Grey said the "Oriental faker, Gypsy fortune-teller, West African and West Indian Obeah-man, Southern root-doctor, Creole Spanish, and French card-reader and white crystal gazer" were all thrown together in Harlem, forming what he called "a sailor's-knot of superstition." He wrote, "The West Indians and Southerners who could possibly simulate that appearance of Orientals—East Indians, Mohammedans, etc.—soon changed their birthplaces and tangled their tongues enough to deceive the black Harlemite."[71]

[67] Domingo 1925: 343.

[68] "Brief Items from Nearby Cities and Towns," *New York Amsterdam News*, 18 May 1927. The African Orthodox Church is a black nationalist iteration of Episcopalianism, founded by Antiguan Dr. George Alexander McGuire and allied with Markus Garvey's Universal Negro Improvement Association (Watkins-Owens 1996: 63–64).

[69] Quoted in Putnam 2013: 74.

[70] Edgar M. Grey, "Harlem—Negro Melting Pot," *New York Amsterdam News*, 20 Apr. 1927.

[71] Edgar M. Grey, "Harlem—The Mecca of Fakers: Oriental Fakers, Gypsies and Obeah-Men," *New York Amsterdam News*, 30 Mar. 1927.

So while there were some "East Indians" in New York, there were also "West Indians" and other black individuals who were passing as "East Indians" and "Mohammedans"—passing, Grey implies, in order to dupe their fellow Harlemites. We find in this charged description of racial, religious passing an accusation similar to that leveled against Ali. However, there was more to such practices than Grey asserts. In northern states, after the Great Migration of millions of African Americans from the southern states to the north, both African Americans and Caribbean migrants were eschewing the category "Negro" by experimenting with novel ethnic identities;[72] Moorish Scientists, Lost Found Nations of Islam, Hebrew Israelites, and other groups undertook what, thinking with Jacob Dorman, we can call "polycultural" social formative work.[73] Drawing from a variety of available traditions (Orientalist esoteric and masonic, among others), they donned their (different) turbans, took on new names, became Muslims or Jews, and produced elaborate ethnogonic myths to authorize new, novel social formations that defied racial and religious categorizations by redefining them.[74]

East Indian passing was intertwined with this complex, racial religious politics, and Ismet Ali, wherever he was ultimately from and however he variously identified himself, was also clearly implicated. Though Ali for years worked as an Indian yogi, with accusations of Trinidadian heritage and his Islamicate names, he can, I think, be usefully situated in an ambiguous place somewhere between the East and West Indies, and between New York's Indian swamis and its Caribbean spiritual entrepreneurs, both of whom donned turbans. A brief detour to examine such African American- and Caribbean-turned-East Indian swamis will let us expand on the variety of cultural political work this kind of racial religious passing did and zero in on the mutual imbrication of the performativity of religion and race.

RACIAL PASSING AND THE HINDU ENIGMA

> Lamb returned to his overcoat. From its pocket he drew a lavender-tinged turban. He put it on his head, letting a strand of straight hair stick out a trifle. He lowered his eyes in saintly aloofness and pulled down his Negroid lips into a pious pucker. He folded his hands into the opposite cuff.
>
> Then they understood. The hotel permitted Orientals to ride the elevators. Before entering, Lamb became an East Indian.[75]

Toward the end of Fannie Cook's 1946 novel *Mrs. Palmer's Honey*, Lamb Hoop is helping to organize a political conference held on the eighteenth

[72] On African American constructions of ethnic identities, see Johnson 2010.
[73] Dorman 2013: 19–20.
[74] On African American re-imaginings of Islam, such as the Moorish Science Temple, see Allen 1998; and Nance 2002. On Black Israelite religions, see Dorman 2013.
[75] Cook 1946: 225.

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floor of a fancy downtown St. Louis hotel at the lagging end of World War II. The conference had a racially mixed attendance and the African American attendees, including Lamb, forbidden to ride the elevators in the lobby, had to use the overloaded freight elevator. As the above quotation indicates, though, owing to Lamb's sartorial ingenuity he and the other African American delegates were able to transform their racial identities in dramatic fashion and, each dressed in turn in Lamb's turban, ride the front elevators one at a time without interference.

What is most pertinent about this scene for our purposes is that in order to pass as "East Indian" Lamb had to not only assume stereotypical "oriental" dress with the turban and the hands in the sleeves, but also affect a certain facial expression and bodily comportment to authorize his performance—the "saintly aloofness" and "pious pucker." This is because "East Indian" identity had been essentially defined not only in racial but also religious terms. This speaks to the larger point about the ways in which religion and race are co-produced.

According to E. M. Forster, writing in the early twentieth century, "everything in India takes on a religious tinge."[76] In American Orientalism, echoing European Orientalism, "The East" has stood for "the spiritual in general" in contradistinction to the material "West." From the Transcendentalists on, groups in the United States have been turning to the "Hindoo" and East Indian for "spiritual" revitalization, and in so doing they have constructed India as essentially religious.[77] The "wise man of the East" was a common trope in the American cultural imagination, one perpetuated, nuanced, and challenged by self-styled yogis and swamis from both South Asia and the United States.[78] The production of this trope in both Europe and America informed Indian middle-class social and self-formation, so that when Vivekananda came to America spreading the word of Raja Yoga, in his speeches he reproduced and inverted for his own purposes the moral valence of British colonial stereotypes of the spiritual East/material West.[79] Lamb's extra "spiritual" flourishes, his thorough embodiment of Orientalist stereotypes, were important for solidifying his passing as East Indian.

As Karen Fields describes, the invisible ontologies of race are buttressed by associated material indexes, a somewhat arbitrary set of props.[80] I argue this is the case for religion as well, as with the above lavender turban, but also the pious pucker. Visible physiological differences like skin color, as well as ritualized performances and racialized and "spiritual" bodily comportments, are

[76] Forster 1983: 86.
[77] Prashad 2000: 18.
[78] Nance 2009: 205–6.
[79] Prashad 2000: 35.
[80] Fields 2001: 295–96. Fields gives the example of the stars Jews had to wear in Nazi Germany, despite the Nazi's insistence on Jews' obvious essential racial difference.

taken as evidence of invisible essences both racial and religious, states of mind and states of being that might otherwise be imperceptible. Lamb's scene is only an obvious example of identification more broadly. Our racial and religious identifications always need props, even when one is not passing as being of "another" race/religion.

Stereotypes inform subject formation; they are incorporated and lived out by both the group being typed as such and by others. Popular Orientalist discourse in the United States was formative and transformative for many groups.[81] Donning the turban and becoming "Hindoo" was useful for African Americans to circumvent the violence of segregation and Jim Crow. It also provided a certain exotic prestige that could be mobilized for economic gain. But most broadly, passing as "Hindoo" was a way of fashioning the self, of cultivating a certain sartorial style and a kind of "spiritual" bearing that Lamb demonstrated. For some, it was not only a workaround of racial segregation but also a mode of life.

The racial order in the United States was largely defined by the black/white binary. In the early twentieth century there was "confusion" among government immigration functionaries as to the race and color of early Indian immigrants and whether they should be categorized as black, white, or something else.[82] Though U.S. racial prejudice loomed for them, Indians, who did not easily fit into the racial binary, had the possibility of partially accessing white privilege, even if they were not considered quite white. They could exploit their own ambiguous racial positioning. For instance, owing to his race Vivekananda was purportedly denied a room in all the "first class hotels" in Baltimore except one.[83] As one paper in 1921 phrased this ambiguity in reference to a court case that granted citizenship to an Indian immigrant: "A Hindu is white although he is black."[84] The cases of two of Ali's fellow yogis, Mozumdar and Thind, clearly bear out this history of ambiguity. The only way to become a U.S. citizen early in the century was to successfully situate oneself within the black/white binary, and Mozumdar was one of the first Indians to do so officially when he claimed citizenship as a white man. Bhagat Singh Thind also made this argument, but in 1923 his claims to whiteness were denied.

[81] African Americans were by no means the only ones experimenting with the discourse, practice, and stereotypes of the "East Indian" in the United States. For instance, Yogi Ramacharaka was the pseudonym of William Walker Atkinson, a well-known Euro-American New Thought author (Thomas 1930: 185). Pierre Arnold Bernard, also known as Oom the Omnipotent, was an early twentieth-century yogi and founder of America's first "tantric order." He staged yogic feats of autohypnosis, purportedly putting himself in a state near death, and he started schools where he taught yoga and hypnosis and gave "Tantric initiation" (Urban 2003: 209–15). We have seen that this was reciprocated when Indian swamis and yogis adopted New Thought and other American esoteric discourses and practices.

[82] Bald 2013: 59.

[83] Swami Vivekananda and *His Guru* 1897: xxiii–iv.

[84] "A Hindu Belongs to White Race," *Savannah Tribune*, 8 Jan. 1921.

Before becoming a swami lecturer, Thind had been a student in California, worked in a lumber mill, and fought in World War I. From the Punjab, he identified as a Sikh, but his lawyers in his Supreme Court case described him as a high caste Hindu who had "pure Indian blood" because of the strictures of the Indian caste system. His lawyers' claims to his citizenship borrowed from ethnology and philology. It was not only popular opinion of what counted as lightness of skin that could define "white" for the courts in this period. The legal precedent of ethnological definitions of whiteness in terms of racial scientific histories of the "Caucasians" (for instance in *Takao Ozawa v. United States*) allowed for the possibility of officially including as "white" people who popular standards would have denied that status. The government lawyers in Thind's case, though, defined white in terms of the ability to "assimilate" to the American "civilization." They argued that "Hindoos" would never be "white," or therefore citizens, because of the almost fanatical exclusivity of caste (the very basis for Thind's lawyers' argument for his racial purity).[85]

Thus Indians, or "Hindoos," in the 1920s vacillated between white and not-white. They were racially pure and therefore Aryan and therefore Caucasian, but they were deemed too racially pure, too discerning to be truly American. Note, though, that the "racial" identity of Indian/"Hindoo," whether white or not, depended on practices (caste) identified during this period as religious (as they often are now). In this way, racial definitions blurred with religious ones in the formation of Indian identity. The category "Hindoo" shows the instability of racial and religious categorizations. Although Indians were not officially white and were at times identified as having "brown" or "black" skin, they purportedly had other "Aryan" features, including their history, their religion, and their hair, which kept their status ambiguous. This ambiguity allowed someone figured squarely within the black/white binary the possibility of identifying themselves as "Hindoo" and slipping between the mechanisms set to regulate the boundaries of those categories. African Americans enacted such identities in a variety of ways and for diverse reasons.

Embracing "Hindoo" racial ambiguity through passing offered the prospect of passing adjacent to the U.S. racial binary. Rottenberg argues that raced subjects must constantly embody norms of whiteness if they are to avoid complete marginalization in American society.[86] Contra this point, though, and in an attempt to move beyond the conceptualization of passing and the performativity of race solely in terms of the black/white binary, I would concur with Roy that colonial mimicry need not have whiteness as the ideal.[87] There were (and still are) productive and destabilizing possibilities in the variety of alternative and subaltern models for human subjectivity,

[85] I rely here on the excellent analysis in Snow 2004.
[86] Rottenberg 2003: 446.
[87] Roy 1998: 55.

including the stereotype of the "Hindoo." That stereotype could be incorporated and redirected to open up different possibilities for how race was performed, outside of the binary black/white. However, because of the definitional ambiguity of "Hindoo" as a racial, religious, and regional identity, and the frequent assertion that the Indian was essentially religious, becoming "Hindoo" involved not only racial passing but a simultaneous religious passing, evincing the interrelatedness of the performativity of religion and race. In this period in the United States, one was unintelligible without the other and they fed into one another in complex ways. To be a convincing "Hindoo" one had to be a convincing Indian as well as Hindu. We can see here a variant of the "paradox of subjectivation":[88] the subject who resists is enabled to do so through the very norms that constrain and regulate practice. Resistance to racial norms and the tyranny of Jim Crow in the form of passing was made possible through precisely the incorporation and repetition of (non-white) racial norms and stereotypes, but in their re-articulation they were repurposed and redirected. And yet passing was not only a workaround regarding repressive laws; for some it was a mode of self-formation more broadly.

"Hindoo" was an authorizing term for spiritual entrepreneurs in U.S. cities, who were also drawing on Egyptian, Islamic, and other orientalized esoteric tropes in constructing particular "oriental" personas.[89] We see this with the Islamicate names of Ismet Ali and his organization, and with his adoption and articulation of yogi, Sufi, and New Thought discourses and practices. In the cosmopolitan cities of the north, African Americans in particular were experimenting with orientalized identities, what Dorman calls "Black Orientalism." Dorman argues that Black Orientalism, while similar to other Orientalisms, was enacted in a "counterhegemonic" mode.[90] It could be used to overtly challenge or subtly subvert the para-colonial U.S. racist order.

We might adopt the term "subaltern Orientalism" to include those besides African Americans who do similar things. Like Saidian Orientalism,[91] subaltern Orientalism refers to the production of knowledge about "the East," including the creation of an ontological distinction between East and West, but it differs in that it does not involve the domination of the "Orient" or creation of knowledge about the East as part of projects of colonization and the management of colonized populations. Subaltern Orientalism would include, at the grassroots level, not only African Americans but Asians and Asian Americans. It would also encompass ambiguous cases like Ismet Ali's, people who adopt and adapt popular knowledge and images of "the East" and personas based

[88] Butler 2011: xxiii.
[89] Nance 2009: 218.
[90] Dorman 2009: 139.
[91] Said 1994.

thereon in their own projects of social- and self-formation, which undermine Orientalism's very distinctions.

Like the fictional narrative of Lamb's method of accessing the whites-only elevator, numerous real life stories tell of African Americans donning "Hindoo" dress and bodily comportment in order to dodge Jim Crow restriction on trains or planes.[92] For African American magicians, passing as a "foreign act," dressing in a turban and eastern dress, allowed their agents to book them at venues across the restrictive color line.[93] This persona of the eastern mystic was performance in that it played into the genre tropes of the magic act, but it was by no means trivial. Performance, as Wirtz has explored, has a part in racial and religious performativity.[94] Some magicians and others took the "Hindoo" stereotype very seriously and incorporated it not only into their acts but also their everyday lives.

Take, for instance, Prince Joveddah de Raja. Born Joseph Downing of Edwardsville, Illinois around the century's turn, Raja spent most of his life in his Hindoo guise, both on and off the stage, and many people identified him as East Indian (or Tibetan) in his daily life. The story goes that when he was little he loved to watch traveling performers, his favorite being the African American magician Charles Sykes, who was with Professor Andre's Medicine Carnival. Sykes reportedly wore a turban during his act and kept it on afterward so he could eat in whites-only restaurants on Main Street.[95] Downing started his career as a magician in vaudeville as Joveddah de Raja, emulating Sykes. In 1926 he began a radio show in New York that dispensed oriental wisdom, and he gave lectures and offered a correspondence course in oriental philosophy, psychology, and mysticism.[96] Having gained success, he built himself a "Moorish castle" in Michigan where he retired and eventually fell on hard times. After his death, true to his "Hindoo" faith, he was cremated.[97]

West Indian performers working in the United States also adopted such "East Indian" dress and manners. The Jamaican-born magician Wilmont Barclay dodged the vaudeville color line by appearing as a "Hindoo" in a turban; along with six Harlem dancing girls, they were "Professor Maharajah and his Yogis and Gooroos of India."[98] And as we have seen, West Indians passed as East Indians off the stage as well, working as orientalized spiritual

[92] E.g., "Changing into a Hindu, Wilton Crawley Makes the Grade Dodges Jim Crow," *Wyandotte Echo*, 11 Nov. 1932; "Queens Negro Pastor in a Turban Gets 'White' Service in Deep South," *New York Times*, 17 Nov. 1947.
[93] Magus 1995: 90.
[94] Wirtz 2014.
[95] Goode 1948: 21.
[96] Thomas 1930: 219.
[97] "De Rajah, Once Wealthy Mystic, Dies in Poverty," *Negro Star*, 19 Jan. 1940.
[98] Magus 1995: 91–99.

entrepreneurs who told fortunes, offered advice, and sold oriental cures. Madame Fu Futtam, possibly of Chinese and African descent, was of Jamaican parentage and raised in Panama. She moved within the circum-Caribbean migratory sphere and ended up in New York. Her husband was Sufi Abdul Hamid, the turban-wearing African American Muslim Buddhist labor organizer and sometime alleged "Black Hitler of Harlem."[99] Like her husband, Fu Futtam experimented liberally with "oriental" identifications, including adaptations of yoga and the yogi. In a classified ad in the "Spiritualist" section of the *New York Amsterdam News*, she advertised herself as a "scientific East Indian Yogi" who, located at 10 East 127th Street near Fifth Avenue, had helped "thousands" in love and business, guiding them to health and happiness. She also offered free "readings" with the one-dollar purchase of her "East Indian Oil of Success."[100]

These examples illuminate the case of Ismet Ali, regardless of whether he was West or East Indian (or both, or neither). That is, African Americans passing as "Hindoo" were not a special case. I use "subaltern Orientalism" to indicate that it was not only African Americans who adapted, incorporated, and lived out these stereotypes; Indians in America and elsewhere did so as well, in subtle and not so subtle ways and to various ends. In his discussions with Fred Lieb in 1927, Bhagat Singh Thind, whom we met earlier and who identified himself as Sikh (Lieb wrote he was a member of "the fighting Sikh race"), told Lieb that without his turban and beard his audiences would find him unconvincing as a swami lecturer: "Without my turban, they thought I was a New York Jew masquerading as a Hindu. With it, they are satisfied I am the genuine article."[101] At the same time, though, and in contradistinction, in one of his 1927 lectures Thind told his audience: "Then what am I? Neither Dr. Thind nor a Hindu, but the eternal consciousness, that soul. Soul is God individualized."[102]

Without his turban and beard—his props—Thind became illegible as an "authentic" Hindu, and was instead taken to be a person from one not-quite-white group passing as someone from another not-quite-white group. Remember that Thind was also passing as a Hindu in his Supreme Court case. Popular assumptions about Hinduism and the Aryan race were the basis for his lawyers' arguments for his essential whiteness. There is a fuzziness here between Sikh and Hindu,[103] and both categories shade between racial and religious. I am not arguing (as Snow seems to in her article) that Thind was somehow really

[99] Putnam 2013: 74–75; McKay 1968.
[100] *New York Amsterdam News*, 20 Dec. 1933.
[101] Lieb 1939: 41. Thind said something similar about his beard during a 1927 lecture (1931: 267).
[102] Thind 1931: 6.
[103] In India, the differences between Sikh, Hindu, and Muslim have sometimes been unclear (Oberoi 1994).

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Sikh and not Hindu. "Hindoo" stereotypes were imposed on him as an Indian in the United States; he was constrained by them but they also became available for him to activate as context varied, which opened up different possibilities. The turban and beard are an important part of the doing of (mostly male) Sikh identity. These sartorial moves, as Thind was clearly well aware, were incorporated into and differently legible within the popular American Orientalist discursive regime. Thind could activate this for his own purposes. At the same time, the promise of Vedantic realization and yogic practice that Thind and Ali espoused was the cosmic transcendence of the particularity of such earthly categorizations and processes of identification. Whether Sikh, Hindu, or "Hindoo," Bhagat Singh Thind was passing: mobilizing, through his sartorial styling, different identifications as his contexts shifted. I argue that the same was true for Hazrat Ismet Ali, with his turban, beard, yogic practice, and pious pose, whatever his racial, national, or religious identification in a given situation.

AN EAST INDIAN AT RARE INTERVALS

After the controversies in New York, Ali fled west to Chicago. But this took him back within range of Chicago's courts, which were still after him for his initial brush with the law there almost five years earlier. After he set up in Chicago again, Ali was eventually apprehended and convicted of running a confidence game on Myrtilla Twitchell. Before he could be sentenced, Ali jumped bail and fled south to Trinidad.

In their portrayal of these events, the Chicago papers brought out particular physical/racial descriptors. For example, the *Chicago Daily News* described Ali as "silky-haired" and "dark-skinned" and his wife as a "dark-skinned lass."[104] Curiously, the *Chicago Defender* referred to Ali's wife as being "white."[105] The *Daily News* also reported that Ali, whose "real" name was E. C. Williams, had been a busboy at the Flossmoor Country Club in Flossmoor, Illinois, a waiter at the Sunset Club, and a chauffeur and valet before that, all before he "let his hair grow long and silky, sprouted an imposing chin foliage, draped a turban about his head and silken robes about his shoulders."[106] Again, the questions of Ali/Williams' racial and national identity, his class position, and his purported fraud were interwoven here. He was ambiguous, dark but "silky-haired." His wife, too, was read simultaneously as both dark and white (perhaps a case of ambiguity by association). The repetition of "silky" for both his hair and his clothes is interesting; the slipperiness of silk here is being connected to the slipperiness of Ali's race, religion, and character, evoking also late nineteenth-century descriptions of

[104] "Fleeing Sheik of Ali."
[105] "Ali's Mysticism Didn't Foretell Prison Term," *Chicago Defender*, 18 Jan. 1930.
[106] "Fleeing Sheik of Ali."

swamis' silky headwear and personalities. But part of the charge made in the press, particularly after he fled to Trinidad, was that Oriental Ali, the East Indian, was "in reality" Christian Williams, a West Indian and a black man. This meant he could not be a true Hindu mystic or authentic yogi, cementing his fraud. The papers, and likely their readers, assumed that these were mutually exclusive categories.

Trinidad police apprehended Ali and took him to court, where a request for extradition proceedings was submitted by Chicago Assistant State's Attorney Harry Busch. Busch had traveled from Chicago bearing a presidential warrant signed by Herbert Hoover to return Ali/Williams to complete his trial. When the police picked up Ali he had reportedly told them, "I know what it is, it is all a made up matter." In court, the officer testified: "I know the brother, Frederick Williams, who belongs to this colony. I don't know if the accused is a native of this colony. I don't know [if] he is a British subject." When he appeared in court the Trinidadian paper the *Port of Spain Gazette* described what Ali had done in Chicago as claiming "to possess supernatural powers." It described Ali/Williams himself as "Fashionably dressed, clean shaven, with smartly cropped head and wearing a pleasant countenance;" and it identified "Elkener Williams," also known as "Sheik Ghulam Ismet Ali," as "an East Indian man."[107] Ultimately, because Ali had been found guilty but fled before sentencing, the extradition request was denied (something of a technicality), and he was set free.[108] I have been unable to find out what happened to him afterward.

In the end I do not want to "solve" the mystery of Ismet Ali, to pin him down by placing him in the "correct" regnant racial and religious categories of the period. Rather, I want to draw out the nuances of the possibilities, indeterminacies, complexities, and contestations that he inhabited. First, we should note Ali/Williams' reported denial to the police, of exactly what charge we do not know. He seems to have foresworn the whole business—it was all made up. But because something is made up does not mean that it is not real. Second, and particularly interesting for our purposes, the *Gazette*'s description of Ali's work as claiming "supernatural powers" is a reference to *obeah*, or witchcraft in the West Indies, what was officially defined in Trinidad law as "the assumption of supernatural powers." To elites in Trinidad, the practices of poor people of color of the sort Ali did were not intelligible as a form of religion. Subaltern itinerant healers and occult practitioners, including ascetics (yogis or sadhus) like Ali, were liable to be categorized as "obeahmen" practicing witchcraft and arrested.[109] Third, we should note the paper's description of Ali's

[107] "On the Trail of a Wanted 'Sheik'"; and "Must the 'Sheik' Return for Sentence?" *Port of Spain Gazette*, 22 Nov. 1930.
[108] "Must the 'Sheik' Return for Sentence?"; and *Kingston Gleaner*, 2 Dec. 1930.
[109] Rocklin 2015.

appearance and how it identified him. His dress was now "fashionable," his hair clean shaven and "smartly cropped," and his countenance "pleasant"; clearly, he was no longer clad in his "Hindoo" turban, robes, guru beard, or long "silken" hair. He now appeared "western" in clothing and comportment. Yet the Trinidadian paper still identified him as "East Indian." It is obvious that Ali/Williams strongly identified as Indian, given his construction of the Ismet Ali persona. As I noted earlier, "East Indian" in the United States of the late 1920s specifically meant South Asian, but in Trinidad "East Indian" did not mean simply South Asian but more specifically an Indian immigrant to Trinidad or a person of Indian descent born there.

The triangulation of this man's names and identifications is particularly germane to our topic. If he was identifiable as East Indian in Trinidad even without his "oriental" garb and names, it seems he may have been, or was at least overwhelmingly legible as, a person of South Asian descent. Given the name Elkener (perhaps Elkenah) Williams, he or his parents may have been converts to Christianity (his brother also had a Christian name). It is also possible that he had both Indian and African Caribbean parentage. Again, his chosen yogi appellations—Sheikh Ghulam and Pir O Murshid Hazrat—are Islamicate names, specifically Ahmadi and Sufi, and so are the names of the organizations he started—Kaaba Alif and Himayat. Ali/Williams may well have had contact with proselytizing Ahmadi Muslims in either the United States or Trinidad and been thereby exposed to Hazrat Inayat Khan's teachings in the United States. And if he grew up in Trinidad among East Indians he certainly would have known Muslims and gained some familiarity with Islam and also with Hindu discourse and practice. But whether he was Trinidadian appears to have been questioned as well, as was his West Indianness. The arresting officer did not know Ali/Williams, though it seems he knew his brother, and he could not verify that Ali was a subject of Trinidad or the British Empire. Earlier I suggested, following John House's allegation, that Ali might have arrived in the United States via Venezuela as a valet to a British oilman. Given the "circum-Caribbean migratory sphere" that Putnam describes, Williams and his brother could have come from other parts of the Caribbean and been repatriated elsewhere. During this period bodies were on the move across multi-colored Atlantics and selves and bodies transformed as they slipped across the borders of colonies and nations, categories and cultures.

Given all this slipperiness and the questions of fraud, I also want to address Ali's work as a yogi and his possible identification as Hindu. Despite his probable background as a Christian, Ali/Williams may not have seen a problem, contradiction, or fraud in his claims to be or actions as a Hindu yogi. The descriptions I have found of Ali's discourse and practice as a yogi all sound rather ordinary given the common practices of his contemporaries in the United States, who mixed Hindu discourse and yoga breathing and

postures with esoterica and, in Ali's case, Islamicate flourish. For the most part, this was not what was brought into question. In the case of Trinidad, starting with the arrival of Indian indentured laborers in the mid-nineteenth century, people of both Indian and African descent who would have been identified as Hindu, Muslim, and Christian came together at the grassroots level around plantations, and they engaged in novel experiments in social formation that drew from traditions across reified religious and racial lines. Attempts to organize regionally representative Hindu organizations in Trinidad gained official recognition only a year or two after Ali's case was heard. One of the first, started in 1931, was the Sanatan Dharma Association of Couva in central Trinidad. Its leader was Michael Saran Teelucksingh, an entrepreneur, member of Trinidad's legislative council, and president of the East Indian National Congress.[110] The Association registered itself with the government in 1932 and remained in operation until the 1950s, with Teelucksingh in various positions of leadership for much of that time. The main problem with the Association, as some (though not all) Hindu-identified individuals in Trinidad saw it, was that Michael Saran Teelucksingh was a self-declared Anglican and that other "non-Hindus," including other Christians and perhaps Muslims, held positions in the leadership and among the membership.[111] In this period, certainly in Trinidad and likely in other parts of the West Indies, identifying as Christian and Muslim did not necessarily exclude also identifying with things Hindu, with all that might entail. Again, Ali's was not a peculiar case: the crossing and fortification of the boundaries between religious identities was part of a constellation of issues relating to the definition and production of Hinduism and Hinduness that was being struggled over in Trinidad, and indeed across the brown Atlantic to India. Hindu and Hindoo have only recently been so differentiated.

CONCLUSION

> One may discover the root of a Hindoo religion in his own private history, when, in the silent intervals of the day or the night, he does sometimes inflict on himself like austerities with a stern satisfaction.[112]

Swami Vivekananda, Joveddah de Raja, Bhagat Singh Thind, and Ismet Ali all in different ways and through both differing and shared mechanisms donned their turbans and became Hindus in America. All of which is not to say, as Thoreau suggests, that we are all somehow also Hindu or that anyone can be a Hindu if they put their mind to it. It is rather a question of power and self-formation. As American society imposed norms and stereotypes on "Hindoos," they had to incorporate, performatively enact, and so naturalize

[110] "Indian Society Gets New Life," *Trinidad Guardian*, 26 Aug. 1931.
[111] "Couva Meeting," *East Indian Weekly*, 23 Jan. 1932.
[112] Thoreau 1906, journal entry from 1 Sept. 1841: 279.

this set of racial religious norms. This required self-work, training one's body in appropriate dress and comportment and cultivating a fluency in "Guru English."

Around the turn of the twentieth century, at the intersection of various transoceanic global flows, transnational "East Indian" and "Hindoo" identities were imagined and reimagined in recursive fashion by various groups across racially and religiously reified lines. Vivekananda and Inayat Khan were producing new kinds of "East Indian" swami, yogi, and Sufi identities from India to and between the United States and Europe, while crosswise, Euro-American Theosophists like Henry Steel Olcott were doing something similar between the United States and Europe to India. Mohandas Gandhi, who first studied the *Bhagavad Gita* with Theosophists in London, was reimagining ascetic practices such as *brahmacharya* as anticolonial activism, first with Indian migrants in South Africa and then in India. And Indian indentured laborers sailing across the *kala pani* (or "black water") from the East to West Indies had to (re)create new modes of life. Some became sadhus and fakirs who were also obeahmen, exchanging and recombining fragments of cultural forms with other colonized groups within the constraints and possibilities of the colonially controlled plantation regime. In the United States, New Thought esoteric philosophers borrowed yogi names and Hindu terminology, and African Americans transformed themselves through new modes of self-making into Moorish scientists and scientific East Indian yogis. South Asian swamis, simultaneously passing and passing through, took in and worked out New Thought, Christian, and neo-Hindu discourse and practice for their own ends. As a yogi, Ismet Ali moved within the intersecting crosscurrents of this productive transnational exchange and experimentation, this imposture of religion and race that starkly revealed religious and racial identities more broadly.

Though much of the biography Ali narrated in the United States may not have been accurate, we might call his self-presentation mythmaking or performative auto-hagiography. Within the constrictions and possibilities of American popular Orientalism, including Hindoo and East Indian stereotypy, Ali in his work drew on a variety of discourses, practices, and modes of self-fashioning, including yoga breathing and postures, Islamicate (alternating Ahmadi and Sufi) nomenclature, American orientalized fakir sleight of hand conjurations, New Thought optimism, trance practices (possibly of Caribbean and/or American vintage), and orientalized Christology. His self-fashioning cannot be reduced to any one of these elements. The ambiguity of Ismet Ali's case is not just a problem of historiography, question of evidence, or result of his purported imposture. In his movement across diverse contexts, through the circum-Caribbean migratory sphere, at the convergence of transoceanic crosscurrents, who Ali was, how he identified himself and how others identified him, and what categories were regnant all changed. Who could be an East Indian, what a West Indian was, how one could be a Hindu

or Muslim, who was black and who white, and how these religious, racial, and regional categories were related varied not only by place but even within the same context.

This was the ambiguity of the racial religious category "Hindoo," which as an identity helps us to flush out the mutual imbrications of the performativity of religion and race. Coming from a particular racial/religious context in the West Indies with its own diverse experiments by peoples of African and Indian descent, Ismet Ali, or perhaps Elkenah Williams, arrived in the productive mix of the northern United States and took to passing as an "East Indian" (as that was understood in his new context) to make a place for himself as a yogi. While some practitioners of yoga strove for the realization of universal truth, they enacted a transnational alter-modernity and, in the United States, became legible as a particular rendering of national, racial, and religious norms. Ali could do yoga to transcend the categories of the cosmos and become one with it, and to short-circuit society's racialized categorizations on his way to becoming Hindu. Yet I would argue that when the impostor Elkenah Williams showed up in a Trinidad courtroom unmasked—clean shaven in a suit with his turban unwound—he was still passing. Identities, religious, racial, or otherwise, conceptualized in the active voice, differ little from passing in that they involve the enactment of identifications and the mobilization of norms and stereotypes that we do not fully create ourselves. By repeatedly doing "who we really are," we are in this sense already passing.

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Abstract: This essay uses the controversies surrounding the enigmatic Ismet Ali, a yogi working in Chicago and New York in the 1920s, to illuminate the complexities of how the performativity of religion and race are interrelated. I examine several moments in which Ali's "authenticity" as Indian is brought into doubt to open up larger questions regarding the global flows of colonial knowledge, racial tropes, and groups of people between India, the United States, and the Caribbean. I explore the ways in which, in the early twentieth-century United States, East Indian "authenticity" only became legible via identificatory practices that engaged with and adapted orientalized stereotypes. The practices of the yogi persona and its sartorial stylings meant to signify "East Indianness" in the United States, particularly the donning of a turban and beard, were one mode through which both South Asian and African Americans repurposed "Hindoo" stereotypes as models for self-formation. By taking on "Hindoo" identities, peoples of color could circumvent the U.S. black/white racial binary and the violence of Jim Crow. This act of racial passing was also an act of religious passing. However, the ways in which identities had to and could be performed changed with context as individuals moved across national and colonial boundaries.