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Re-Orienting the Gaze: On Being a South Asian Deadhead

DEEPAK SARMA

One of the most visible aspects of the 1960s counterculture was a resurgence of interest in cultures and practices of the so-called mystical “East,” the regions of South and Southeast Asia that include India, Nepal, Afghanistan, Thailand, Cambodia, and more. Rock music was one barometer of this renewed American (and Western) interest: this era, after all, produced the visual imagery of the iconic *Axis: Bold as Love* (released December 1967) which depicted Hendrix in an almost identical fashion of portrayals of the Hindu god Viṣṇu in his Viśvarūpa form. The world of the Grateful Dead was another place where such fascinations and imaginations took hold, as seen in the imagery on the cover of their very first album. Designed by Alton Kelley and Stanley Mouse, the art incorporates a picture taken of a bronze sculpture of the Hindu god Narasiṃha, an *avatāra* of the god Viṣṇu (Sarma 2020).¹

A veritable Pandora’s box of problems bursts open when one considers the propriety and politics of appropriation. Is it acceptable for members of one group, especially those representing the mainstream or dominant ethnicity of a culture, to adopt the clothing styles of a marginalized or formerly colonized or oppressed ethnic group? For example, should it be socially acceptable for white Americans to take on the symbols and religious iconography of another culture, or to wear their hair in cornrows or dreadlocks, or even don an Afro-style wig? If so, how do those behaviors differ, both in nature and degree, from the now socially unacceptable

practice of wearing blackface? As scholars know, these questions are not easy to discuss, but as I have argued, ownership can be hard to establish and harder to prove, especially when it comes to cultural and religious symbols, iconography, and other emblems (Sarma 2013).

Scholars in a range of fields have long been interested in how various elements, aspects, and trappings of South and Southeast Asian culture played roles in the Sixties, but the Dead offer a unique lens for examining the issues this raises. Beyond their immediate contexts of the Haight-Ashbury and the counterculture more broadly, the Dead's use of Hindu imagery can be seen in several different ways. This paper, however, focuses on how the band's fans picked up on that original interest and developed it within their own distinctive subculture. Beginning in the 1960s and continuing until today, Dead fans have continued that interest.

Deadheads were not the first to orient their gaze towards the so-called Orient, nor will they be the last. But how are these influences or appropriations perceived by Deadheads themselves? And how are they perceived by members of the source traditions whose cultural artifacts are being referenced and displayed—or, more critically, used and appropriated? As a scholar with Indian heritage with long experience in the Deadhead scene, I occupy an unusual place in between cultures and can offer both an etic and an emic perspective on these uses. This paper offers my own reflections from the perspective of a comparative religion scholar with an extensive history of informal, and now increasingly formal, study of Deadheads.

How, then, do the appropriation and modification of Indian and other South Asian cultural artifacts look to an Indian/Indian-American? How do those practices appear to a white Caucasian Deadhead? And what do these issues suggest for the larger discourse of Grateful Dead studies? This paper offers an examination of the issues raised by these questions by proposing two basic types of Deadhead use of Indian and South Asian cultural artifacts. Derived from my own extensive participant-observation of the scene, these types offer a hermeneutic structure that provides a foundation for future research.

Clothing Colonial Complexities

While there are many elements of South Asian and Indian culture that appear in the Deadhead scene, including incense and instruments, *bhang* and bedspreads, chillums and chapatis, the one that brings the issues of appropriation to the forefront are those involving clothing: tunics, dresses made in India with Indian paisley prints, cotton scarves and T-shirts with mysterious (yet purportedly efficacious) Sanskrit mantras, and baggy drawstring pants featuring images of a Hindu god or goddess. Clothing, after all, can become a costume: either an instrument of transformation or sometimes merely a mode for deception, as in a masquerade. When I first began to attend concerts in the 1980s, the prevalence of these clothes and styles was challenging: As an Indian-American, what was I to make of these fashionable fans? Even more, I wondered what these Deadheads thought their apparel signified as they made, remade, and reimagined themselves in these new ways? Did they consider how their use might appear to anyone other than white Deadheads? If so, how did they think their use appeared to Indian Americans, especially those who were fellow fans and necessarily had a very different perspective on the contexts of that apparel?

The issue is not merely one of ownership. Rather, it is that the adoption of the symbols, clothing styles, and other cultural appurtenances of the colonized or oppressed, which have been historically derided or considered a blemish or stain by the cultures of the colonizers, then becomes a mechanism that transmogrifies those once denigrated signifiers into markers of “coolness”: Now, when worn by those who represent the former colonizers, these symbols become a way to gain cultural capital. Now they are celebrated, even ironically advantageous, but only when worn or displayed by those who did not create them, and for whom they have a very different meaning and historical context. Put differently, should scholars and Deadheads see such use as the colonial, or post-colonial, manifestation of Blumberg’s trickle-up (sometimes called the bubble-up) theory of fashion, where the privileged appropriate the fashion of the lower classes, and in this colonial context, the subalterns (Blumberg 1974)?

The question goes to the heart of the issue of race in the US. For Indian Americans, the issue is especially pointed, given the 1923 immi-

gration case of Bhagat Singh Thind. Thind was denied American citizenship on the basis of race, even though he was considered racially white. Yet, according to the court, his brown skin color meant that he would not be considered white “by the average man” (Coulson 2017). Despite the passage of nearly a century, Thind’s case remains a source of pain to Indian Americans due to the ongoing quotas and restrictions placed on Indians because of the Immigration and Nationality Act of 1965, the so-called Hart-Cellar Act, which permits only a limited number of technically skilled Indians into the United States. The effects of those rules have created an intellectually elite yet marginalized class. For this essay, the point is that when there is a social inequity between cultural insiders and cultural outsiders, it freights that trickle-up process with even greater weight and meaning, especially when it is perpetuated by ongoing immigration policies that echo earlier, unequivocally racist policies sanctioned by US courts. Those policies may no longer be the law of the land, but their legacies continue to permeate immigration rules.

Those lingering effects can be seen in the reaction to Indian Americans who wear Indian clothing. As has been documented, the US has experienced a recent resurgence in racist violence against a range of victims, from Jews to African Americans to Asian Americans. Indian Americans have been targeted as well. While skin color is enough to trigger an assault, clothing is a lightning rod for hostile attention, which makes the trickle-up theory especially destructive. If an insider wears such clothing, it can prompt unprovoked violence; yet a white American can dress up in a similar fashion with relative impunity. Worse, that act can net the wearer cultural capital. Clothing, then, both denotes yet obscures colonial complexities and concerns. While the world no longer countenances colonialism and its crimes, its legacies are very much alive when the colonized and formerly colonized, who have experienced the erasure and infantilization of their cultures by colonizers, then find the trappings and symbols of those cultures displayed and worn as a kind of aspirational mimicry, as Philip Deloria noted in his groundbreaking *Playing Indian* (1998).² In that light, it is no wonder that the discussion of cultural appropriation has found such uses to be an extension or even recrudescence of colonialism. So what does it mean to wear this sort of clothing to a Dead show?

Going Native?

Before considering that question, one should note that it is by no means limited to the world that Deadheads have made. It appears in even supposedly more enlightened settings, such as professional academic environments. At conferences and faculty and department meetings for South Asianists who study Hinduism and India, most scholars who are white women don South Asian garb. These tend to be either printed scarves (cotton or more likely silk) or the ever-present dangling earring, in the traditional Indian style. The accoutrements confer status as well as social and cultural capital, especially if they have a story about the origins of the item, the special relationship that they had with the seller, or better, the indigenous person who gave it to them. Is the use of the item intended to show their appreciation of South Asia? Certainly. Is it a symbol for elite or esoteric knowledge? Perhaps. But in this setting, is it also intended to convey to others that the wearers have, to some degree, transcended their own cultural origins and become so immersed in the object of their study that they have “gone native”? Usually.

All of these elements come into play when we consider the Deadhead use of such symbols. What is intended to be conveyed by the happy Deadhead who dons Indian clothing? Have they gone “native” too? Or is that simple act more complex than even the scholar who adopts those trappings?

Deadheads who elect to wear Indian (or other ethnic) garb fall into two basic categories. These tropes, or idealized types, can be supported by scholarly references, but they derive primarily from more than three decades of informal study rooted in my own experience in the scene. In Deadhead terms, we might call these categories the “The Other Ones” and the “Eyes of the World.” Not all Deadheads who adopt Indian or ethnic garb or accoutrements fit these types exactly, and some of the inferences suggested here are necessarily speculative, in the absence of formal ethnographic interviews. But they outline a carefully developed schema that, while subjective, may still serve as an initial prompt for discussion and a useful basis for further research.

Members of “The Other One” group perceive themselves as coming from bland American households. The Grateful Dead scene was and is a

place for them to break out of these constraints and embrace a new and more colorful—or at least, less flavorless—persona, if only temporarily. Peter Conners, author of the memoir *Growing Up Dead* (2009), discusses this type of fan. Donning Indian and other clothing styles can be seen as a response to what these fans perceive to be a cultural background they find blanched, boring, and nondescript.

Yet this begs the question of what that exotic impression they hold actually connotes. What stereotypes or essentialism are these Indian-clothing wearers bringing with them and who do they imagine themselves to be, or imagine themselves becoming, when they don these clothes? Surely it is not the professional, information technology-doctor-scientist Indian. Nor is it the working-class, convenience store trope, offensively depicted as Apu on *The Simpsons*. For scholars who study India, the western practice of wearing such clothing echoes a cultural dichotomy that separated the materialist West from the so-called spiritual East first identified in the late nineteenth century by Swami Vivekananda. For “The Other Ones,” the trappings of Indian clothing are not just casual, colorful costumes, they signify that the wearer shares the spiritual orientation of the mystical East—though without the scholarly work that their academic counterparts have undertaken.

There is less spiritual element involved as well. For some Caucasian women, wearing Indian dresses signifies their belief that they embody the essence of what they imagine to be the exotic and erotic attitudes and knowledge of Indian women, usually limited to superficial impressions of tantric sex. The larger point is that regardless of the motive, the identification of the wearer with their own beliefs and readings raises the question of whether there is an ontological change in the wearer of Indian garb, or if the transformation is merely make-believe.

For some, the clothing is merely a foil and any symbolism that may be implicitly or explicitly embedded, such as images of deities, is unknown and inconsequential. But when there is some knowledge of that imagery and symbolism, that usage alters those meanings, giving the symbols new valences and functions—in other words, a complete and total appropriation. This is part of a complex process that Rhea Almeida, Pilar Hernandez-Wolfe, and Carolyn Tubbs call a process of Otherings: “the

acts of naming, categorizing and classifying acts of power to demarcate the center from the periphery, the normal from the abnormal, same from different, and self from Other” (Almeida et al, 2011, 46). The wearer thus essentializes the “other” and commandeers the “abnormal.”

Some Deadheads may claim a complete a total ignorance of racial and colonial complexities when asked about the cultural origins of the clothes they wear—and indeed, there are certainly those who choose clothing solely based on superficial aesthetics. Here, the concern is not with those who, in good conscience, are ignorant, but rather with those who have some awareness but choose to assert total color blindness in their choices, willfully ignoring or dismissing the larger social, cultural, historical, and political implications raised by donning those clothes and trappings. Color blindness is the belief that everyone should be treated equally without regard to race. On the surface, this appears laudable, yet it conceals and denies the racial experience and history of marginalized, subjugated, and dispossessed peoples, conveniently sweeping aside the ongoing claims of their heritage and obviating any assertion of appropriation.

The Deadhead scene can inadvertently support this position: the scene’s avowed embrace of tolerance, inclusivity, and community can ironically dampen the assertion of those claims. And the scene’s traditionally apolitical stance underscores that potential, offering fans a way to avoid, disengage, or even deny and dismiss such concerns. Thus, when persons of color or from marginalized backgrounds raise the issue of appropriation, they are violating the terms of the community: rather than seeking to improve that community, and ensure that it is in fact living up to its ideals, instead the questioner is deemed race-conscious or even racist, rather than the reverse (Neville et al 2016).

Beyond the world of the Dead, however, this view draws on the presupposition that we are already living in a post-racial world, which makes possible the Deadhead vision of a egalitarian community. This overlooks evidence to the contrary, as Steven Gimbel (2021) has discussed, but it fits with a larger pattern in music fan culture. In her article on color-blind racial ideology in EDM festivalgoers, Kaitlyne Motl bluntly notes that, “Insulated by veneers of white ignorance and innocence, the white major-

ity of popular EDM festivals participants appropriate, ahistoricize, and consume patchworked cultural products as costumes, largely with impunity” (2018, 253). Furthermore, “dress talk illuminates how these discussions routinely buttress color-blind ideology, reinforcing larger racial hierarchies within a space claimed to be immune from such inequities” (Motl 2018, 253). In this connection, it can be argued that Deadheads represented a kind of white utopia, an example of what Amanda Lucia argues in *White Utopias: The Religious Exoticism of Transformational Festivals* (2020) is part of to a history of privileged entitlements, colonialism, and, in some cases, even white supremacy.

Gimbel’s argument is more nuanced, acknowledging the aspirational qualities of the scene, but the point is that the Dead scene still benefitted from privilege, and that allows those who benefit from it to choose not to think about race and ethnicity. While some Deadheads refuse to acknowledge the implications of wearing Indian symbols, others, of course, can learn: indeed, the Deadhead values of compassion and empathy incline good-hearted and well-meaning fans to feel shame and remorse when they learn about appropriation. Some may modify their behavior, yet some will simply reinterpret their choices, choosing instead to see their clothing choice as a statement of alliance, solidarity, even kinship, recasting appropriation as an expression of support. Yet genuine understanding, and sincere support, would reflect the recognition that no such usage can escape the taint of appropriation; moreover, there are far better—and efficacious—ways to leverage privilege to ameliorate racial and ethnic inequalities and injustices.

Given the complexities and broad reach of “the Other Ones” category, it may be foundational, with the “Eyes of the World” type more properly seen as subsidiary, but there are important distinctions. The “Eyes of World” group are those whose theological commitments to religious pluralism align with new age spiritualism, combining elements from Perennialism, Unitarianism, and mysticism (Mercandante 2014). For these Deadheads, all religions have an element of truth in them that can provide tools for adherents to access the divine, the mystical, and/or the unity of life, consciousness, or existence. For this type, a Dead show is, in Eliadian terminology, an *axis mundi*, a place where the sacred can

manifest or reveal itself to the astute practitioner (Eliade 1957). Adherents embrace the truths, rituals, symbols, clothing, languages, gods, goddesses and other cultural artifacts without regard to origin, time, or place, in the belief that this adoption can bring the bearer closer to, or even facilitate, the desired mystical experience (Sarma 2015). The same practitioner may have an altar at home that utilizes religious symbols from different religions, cultures, and practices—elements that are tools to be utilized. That frames their adoption of Indian clothing: as scholars in an array of fields, not just religious studies, have noted, clothing can indeed change perception. Here, the Indian-garbed Deadhead wishes for an ontological transformation, even if that is merely imagined.

The consequences of that may seem trivial, yet they have real-world implications. I learned that at a concert at Chicago's Soldier Field in the early 1990s. It was the only time that I wore Indian clothing to a Dead show: a salmon-colored Kurta top with a lungi, a sort of sarong. As I was walking around before the show began, I felt a paper cup hit me, then a fusillade of balls of paper, popcorn, and other inconsequential missiles. None were injurious, at least physically; but they were very much intended to wound. They succeeded: I was not welcome, these fans were saying. I looked around for support; I made eye contact with passersby. Many people witnessed it but no one intervened. No one confronted my assailants; no one remonstrated with them; no one comforted me.

Beyond the anger, embarrassment, and anguish the experience engendered, there was a larger lesson. The scene that I had revered as my Deadhead utopian community—where we were all one, safe, and welcome—was not immune to the larger politics and pressures of American society. This is not news to scholars familiar with the debates over Reagan's policies that raged in the Deadhead scene in the 1980s and more recently sparked by the arguments over conservative pundits who profess to be Dead fans, part of a larger discussion of the Dead's supposed consonance with conservative politics, as a session at the first Grateful Dead Studies Association conference explored. But for this paper, my experience also gets at what is at stake when different ethnicities wear Indian clothing. I was never met with a hostile reaction when I wore standard American clothes or Deadhead garb. And I remember seeing men and

woman wearing Indian clothing all around me at that concert, attracting no such attention. Their apparel meant something very different than mine, even though it was objectively the same.

Conclusion

The urge to reinvent oneself, even if only for a show, is not pernicious, even or perhaps especially when it entails donning clothing that can be seen as opposing the stereotypes associated with mainstream, white American culture. Yet when the colonizers take on the garb of the colonized, it is often a kind of mimicry and mockery, as Homi Bhabha has argued (1994). That ingrained cultural awareness may have been what shielded my fellow Indian-garbed showgoers who were not Indian Americans from the reaction that I received.

For Grateful Dead studies, discussion of Deadhead mores and behaviors has focused on its subcultural elements and its countercultural heritage; discussion of minority representation and viewpoints within the Deadhead experience remains in its infancy. For scholars, these issues bring Grateful Dead studies into larger conversations that are a vital and timely part of academic discussion today. Indeed, as much as Grateful Dead studies is still uncovering and defining the remarkable contributions of the music and its reception, that work is part of a larger effort to weave the scholarly study of the Dead phenomenon into the academy. As the discourse grows in sophistication, it is vital to explore the role of marginalized communities in the Deadhead experience, not just Asians and South Asians but Native Americans and African Americans, all of whose musical traditions find expression in the band's music as well. Just as the band's music was a complex interweaving of traditions, so too was their audience. As scholars explore the contested meanings and legacies of colonialism in the Grateful Dead experience, we will be better able to position Grateful Dead studies as a useful lens for examining how these complex and contentious issues play out in a revealing and in many ways unique context.

Notes

1. For a discussion with Alton Kelley on the art, see Jackson (1984). Scholars have begun to explore the larger significance of the album's cover art; see Williams (2021) and Meriwether (2021).
2. Deloria addresses this specifically as it relates to the "Grateful Dead Indians" he observed at Dead shows in the early 1990s (1998, 181–191).

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