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Review

Engaging South Asian Religions: Boundaries, Appropriations and Resistances, by Matthew Schmalz and Peter Gottschalk (eds.). Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2011. 253 pp. $75.00. ISBN 978-1-4384-3323-3 (hardback). $24.95. ISBN 978-1-4384-3324-0 (paperback).

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The cover of this volume features a thought-provoking photographic image composed by one of the editors, Peter Gottschalk. Entitled 'Reframing Ramesh Tripathi, Nandlal Singh and the nearly absent ethnographer', the image shows concentric photographic frames through which we view agents in a rural scene. The inner frame shows a man in a dhoti, sitting cross-legged, being interviewed, and an observer (translator? facilitator?) in shirt and trousers, also sitting cross-legged. A hand reaches into this frame holding a microphone, but the body and face of the interviewer exist in an outer frame only in silhouette. The 'nearly absent ethnographer' remains anonymous, shadowy, in the margins. Does this signify an awkward dislocation? Or an aspiration to be invisible, albeit one immediately denied by the presence of the microphone?

Even before opening this book, students and researchers are challenged to think both expansively and carefully about their own subjectivity, their own location within the fields in which they roam. Critical reflexivity has become a major theme in many fields of humanities research, and this volume of interlinked essays on the study of religion in South Asia in the western academy, carefully put together by Gottschalk and Matthew Schmalz, contributes provocatively to this theme. Importantly, the viewer of the cover is challenged not just by the shadows of the 'nearly absent', but by the concentric framing of the image(s). The dynamics of framing, Gottschalk seems to be saying, both supply and erase meaningful contexts, invoking us to reflect again on the production of knowledge and understanding. As the editors state in the introduction, the book is focused on the 'epistemological and interpretive paradigms' (p. 2) that configure engagement between different inter-

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locutors in the production of this knowledge and understanding. How these paradigms are produced, and how they develop as they engage with other—sometimes conflicting—paradigms, is then the basic field of enquiry in this volume.

The editors begin by themselves sketching out a paradigmatic framework for thinking about the dynamics of framing. This framework consists of a relational flow between boundaries, appropriations and resistances. That is, how paradigms are produced through the assertion of social and epistemological boundaries, how they develop through power-laden modes of engagement and interchange, and how they are questioned by and respond to resistance in ways which can frequently lead to the assertion of new boundaries.

The nine substantive essays in the volume are organized in three sections loosely speaking to the three phases of this dynamic. Thus, in the first section, on boundaries, there is an interesting piece by Gottschalk on the developing architecture of knowledge informing the British approach to census-taking in India in the nineteenth century; a challenging essay by Arvind Mandair tracing a genealogy linking the Hegelian dichotomization of (Western) history and (Eastern) religion to what he argues is a postcolonial historicism that implicitly marginalizes religion; and, almost in direct response to this, an engaging piece by Sufia Uddin that focuses closely on the practices and ideas of people devoted to the figure of Bonbibi in Bengal and Bangladesh. Uddin uses this case study to explore the important liminal territory between Hindu and Muslim, and how conceptual terms such as 'syncretism' fail to capture the nuanced practices, the subtly drawn boundaries, that are often apparent in such arenas. The second section on appropriations includes essays by Schmalz, William Pinch and Liz Wilson. The essays by Schmalz and Pinch explore the engagement between Christian and Hindu communities in different localities of India, and appropriations of practice, sacred power and mythic narratives across this boundary. Wilson by contrast explores the potential for the life of Gotami, the aunt and adoptive mother of the Buddha, to be appropriated as a paradigm of contemporary feminism—a rather different intellectual exercise.

The third section focuses on resistance, and in some ways this is the most intriguing part of the book, in the first instance because it includes essays by James Laine and Paul Courtright which reflect on very direct, sometimes violent resistance to their work. Both Laine's work on Shivaji and Courtright's on Ganesh fell foul of developing discourses of Hindu chauvinism in the early twenty-first century. These essays provide useful first-hand accounts of these recent events in the history of scholarship on South Asia, and also lead to some interesting reflections on the impact of the 'politics of sentiment' (p. 201) and outrage on the study of South Asia. Such outrage is generated, as Laine emphasizes, not just by orthodox and/or patriotic voices, but also by 'more subtle narratives that mindlessly glorify the sanctity of free speech and enlist the scholar in a self-congratulatory enterprise that blocks

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self-critical thought and emplots his or her work in yet another hegemonic narrative' (p. 170).

Laine's observation is interesting because of the ways in which it points up the ambiguous position of the scholar in relation to the practitioner. This is a theme taken up in the third chapter in this section, a thoughtful piece by Shahzad Bashir on the Nurbakhshi sect in Baltistan. Bashir reflects on his position as a US-based historian of Pakistani origin, researching the founder of this sect, Mohammad Nurbakhsh (d. 1464?), and invoked by his contemporary followers to present specific attributes of their founder in the context of the delicate negotiation of their position in the Islamic landscape of contemporary Pakistan. Bashir's double identity locates him as both authoritative outsider and potentially sympathetic insider, a position which leads him to reflect on processes of objectification through academic research. Of course, we are all familiar with the problems of objectification in the course of representing groups, their ideas and their practices in academic work. Bashir however highlights a reverse dynamic: that is, 'the people we study must objectify us to put our presence among them to use for their own purposes', so that, 'by taking up the study of religious life, we enter into a kind of dialectic of objectification and appropriation that can lead to transformative effects on both sides' (p. 175). Here, I think, is an observation with which both Courtright and Laine would concur, but even for those less directly affected by such processes of objectification, it is an important point to reflect on as central to the practice of engaging South Asian religions.

The volume is finished off with a short section which includes an afterword offered by Saurabh Dube and some responses to this afterword from some of the authors of individual chapters in the book (Mandair, Uddin and Schmalz). Dube's afterword is couched in assertive, challenging terms, and I suspect it is for this reason that the editors found it necessary to allow some responses from authors who might otherwise have felt frustrated by some of the lines of thought attributed to them in the afterword. One feels tempted to invoke Bashir's idea of objectification here—a dynamic not just between 'scholars' and 'practitioners', it seems, but perhaps a more complex web of representational interactions between multiple agents, including scholars themselves. Dube comments that western academics are, like the Mr Jones of Bob Dylan's *Ballad of a Thin Man*, sometimes to be found wandering around 'in a bewildered daze...aware that something is happening, but not knowing exactly what it is' (p. 207). It is an entertaining image, but perhaps does not do justice to the serious intent of the scholars writing in this volume, who clearly *are* thinking twice, as they wander down the long lonesome road.

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