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Kate Marsh. *India in the French Imagination: Peripheral Voices, 1754-1815*. Empires in Perspective Series. London: Pickering and Chatto, 2009. 211 pp. \$99.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-1-85196-994-4.

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Alternative Imaginings

Kate Marsh subtitled her most recent work “peripheral voices,” referring to both the peripheral status of the French in colonial India as well as the marginality of French India in the historiography of South Asia and of the French Empire. For most students and scholars of European colonialism and South Asia, the French presence in India is a minor detail, a smattering of points on a large map dominated by British territorial markers. Scholarly work on the five French *comptoirs* (counters or posts) has been limited primarily to the extensive volumes written by the historian Jacques Weber, which have not yet been translated from the original French into English, and thus remain inaccessible to many audiences who are becoming increasingly interested in the experiences of non-British colonialism in South Asia.[1] Marsh has been instrumental in bringing together a group of researchers, primarily in the United Kingdom, who have over the past decade propelled French India into discussions of comparative colonialisms and have complicated understandings of the importance of colonialism in the cultural and social lives of those in the metropole.[2] Though the political status and colonial presence of France in India may indeed have been peripheral, in this work Marsh shows how the marginality of France in India led to the construction of India as an imagined space in the French imagination that was larger-than-life.

What does it mean to know something or some place? Is it possible to understand the inner workings and outer limits of a collective imagination? These

are questions that have troubled and inspired scholars of postcolonialism, at least since the publication of Edward Said’s *Orientalism* in 1978. Marsh begins by arguing that it is important to recognize the “implications of France’s subordinate colonial status for techniques of representation used in French-language texts on India” (p. 2). Said found the binaries of colonial representation to be tools of power; Marsh challenges this canonical idea by showing how the triangular colonial formation between India, Britain, and France requires a system of analysis that destroys binaries and instead emphasizes webs of connections and systems of power. The author’s sources range from collections of letters from missionaries to philosophical tracts, from travelogues to novels. Utilizing postcolonial theory to understand the importance of India to France, intellectually and politically, is something that Marsh does particularly well, and her focus on the intersections between history and fiction will appeal to historians and other social scientists typically unconvinced by the importance of the imagination to historical subjects. For example, while historians have often privileged such sources as the letters of missionaries and European travelogues over works of fictions, Marsh shows how techniques of representation were consistent across these genres and how authors influenced each other, making the inclusion and analysis of fictional texts imperative to understanding the historical period. Marsh brings together a strong historical methodology with postcolonial literary analysis to push our understandings of how competing colonialisms influ-

enced the construction of French “political and cultural identities” (p. 7).

The influence of Said is clear throughout this work, but Marsh consistently pushes the many boundaries of Said’s framework, sometimes taking it further and other times arguing directly against it. For instance, in chapter 4, “Mythical India,” Marsh recognizes that on the surface, French intellectuals’ use of Hindu myth to construct the idea of India as a bounded space “appear[s] to support Said’s theory that Europeans believed India incapable of representing, or speaking, for itself” (p. 69). However, she argues against Said that for Europeans living in India, knowledge was gathered not just from mythology but also from Hindu and Persian texts, the Indian intelligentsia, and texts shared between English, French, and German intellectuals. Instead of military conquest and knowledge production going hand in hand, Marsh argues that the greatest moment of French interest in India occurred between 1754 and 1815, the period during which they lost their colonial power in India. This powerful argument leads us to ask why India became important to France and the French intellectual elite, when the prospects for colonial-political power pointed elsewhere. Marsh argues that while no one in France actively advocated attempting to expand territory in India after 1814, the idea that France *could* have been the dominant European power in the subcontinent held “imaginary potential” (p. 140). It was this potential that compelled the French public to hold on to the idea of a French Empire in India and to construct alternative notions of the amount of power France held in the global theater.

The strongest thread of argumentation throughout this volume is the connection the author makes between political and historical events and the production of cultural material forms. Marsh moves brilliantly between the historical experiences of the French in India (and in the case of a visit by the South Indian leader, and enemy of the British, Tipu Sultan, and two of his advisers to Versailles in 1788, Indians in France) and French literary representations of India as an imagined space. Throughout each chapter, Marsh looks at both fiction and “fact,” tracing the tropes and linguistic constructions that blur the line between the two modes of representation, as fiction, represented here by novels and plays, borrows from fact: travelogues, memoirs, and journalistic writings. Marsh shows how the *philosophes* became increasingly interested in India and were insistent on identifying and utilizing “authentic” texts to inform their writings (p. 86). Of course, the “authenticity” of the texts should always be questioned, as Marsh maintains that many of

the supposedly authentic Hindu or Brahmanic texts that Voltaire relied on in the writing of his 1756 work, *Essai sur les moeurs et l’esprit des nations*, were either written by Jesuit missionaries as tools to convert Hindus or were written in the service of one of the many trading companies. Marsh argues that it is not only the “indien” that was defined by these narratives, but also the French self in opposition to other Europeans who were also present in India, particularly the British, but the Spanish and Portuguese as well.

Perhaps the most important trope for French thinkers of India is what Marsh calls the idea of *l’Inde perdue*. Understanding the long-term importance of India to France hinges on the experience of *losing* India to Britain during the Seven Years’ War. Marsh discusses the myth of the lost French Empire in India by looking at writings by French writers, in India and France, who continuously saw France as the “potential liberators” of India, adding that “the French may have lost territorial control on the subcontinent but they had not lost Indian goodwill” (p. 84). India is an important site of exploration for understanding the construction of French and British identities in the colonial period, and Marsh argues that the mythologizing of two particular historical figures, Joseph Dupleix, who is credited with establishing the French system in India and making Pondichéry an important site of empire, and Thomas-Arthur de Lally, who was held responsible for the loss of French India in 1763, was the foundation for the creation of French colonial identity during the Second Empire, after 1815. As authors of fiction as well as scholarly treatises focused on counterfactual histories of the French in India, they created a rhetorical space in which the French appear as superior colonizers to the British. The construction of the French as enlightened colonizers became increasingly important during the period of decolonization, as the French attempted to retain their empire after 1945, first in India and then in Indochina and North and West Africa, a subject Marsh addressed in her first monograph, *Fictions of 1947: Representations of Indian Decolonization, 1919-1962* (2007).

Aimé Césaire once wrote that historians are the “novelists of civilization,” deeply implicit in the construction of the West as the pinnacle of the civilized world.[3] For Césaire, the people with power always subsumed the voices and histories of the colonized. While Marsh succeeds in showing how important the “epistemological occupation” of India was to the maintenance of the wider French Empire, the reader is left wondering what effects these constructions had on the people in the colonies. The proxy war between the British and the French in In-

dia certainly mattered to the construction of French colonial identities, but it is unclear that it mattered at all to the people in India. While French India was empty to those constructing it from Europe, it was populated by a variety of people, some who were indigenous to the region and became compelled to adopt French identity during the Revolution and in subsequent years, others the children of French and Indian parents, who became actively involved with the construction of a French Indian space and identity separate from metropolitan imaginings of the same space.[4] This leads us to question whose voices really represent the periphery—a question that does not fit into the purview of this current work, but should be considered when examining the construction of a national-colonial space. Marsh effectively argues that techniques of representation in metropolitan French literature spanned several genres and borrowed from non-French literature, yet the lack of engagement with French Indian texts produced in the colonies and the diaspora leads to a renewed establishment of the binary between colonizer and colonized, a binary that Marsh desires to deconstruct. Still, this work is an excellent entry point for the further investigation of representations of both India and France from a variety of sources, as additional research will surely show the multifaceted dimensions of “national imaginations” that transcended geopolitical borders, alternative imaginings of nations, and the

perceived essence of national and colonial identities.

Notes

[1]. Jacques Weber, *Les Établissements français en Inde au XIXe siècle (1816-1914)*, Librairie de l'Inde, 5 vols. (Paris: Librairie de l'Inde, 1988); and Jacques Weber, *Pondichéry et les comptoirs de l'Inde après Duplex. La démocratie au pays des castes* (Paris: Denoël, 1996).

[2]. Marsh and her colleagues recently compiled an impressive bibliography of works in French on South Asia, which all scholars and students of France, Francophone literature, and the colonial world will find very useful. See “French Books on India: From Duplex to Decolonization,” <http://www.liv.ac.uk/soclas/research/Peripheralvoices/french-books/FBI-Bibliography.pdf>.

[3]. Aimé Césaire, *Discourse on Colonialism*, translated by Joan Pinkham (New York: New Review Press, 2000), 55.

[4]. Animesh Rai, *The Legacy of French Rule in India, 1674-1954: An Investigation of a Process of Créolization* (Pondichéry: Institut français de Pondichéry, 2008); and Adrian Carton, “Shades of Fraternity: Creolization and the Making of Citizenship in French India, 1790-92,” *French Historical Studies* 31 (2008): 581- 607.

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