Speaking Through Bodies, Exhibiting the Limits: British Colonialism and Gandhian Nationalism

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Abstract This essay examines how Gandhi's understanding of his gendered and religious identity was shaped by colonial discourse. Mahatma Gandhi, like many of his Indian counterparts, came to believe in the powerful narrative articulated by the West that attributed British colonization of India to Indian effeminacy, apathy, and "deviant" sexual behavior. Gandhi's capitulation to British ideals of masculinity in his youth made him focus his critical gaze on his body and it is these "experiments" with him self as a subject that facilitated the formulation of a novel anti-colonial discourse that restructured the body's economy of pleasure sprioritizing self-discipline in the service of the nation.

Gandhi's example illustrates that traditions and histories are disrupted not just by the consciousness of dissident subjects, but also by representational practices. Western "regimes of truth" both facilitated Gandhi's initial self-reproach and his later transformation of the figure of the Hindu ascetic and ascetic practices to contest and alter colonialist views of Hindu religion and masculinity. For Gandhi, nationalist asceticism functions as a "technology of the self" (Foucault), as essential to the process of ethical for mation, as certain types of bodies, behaviors, and desires are constituted in and through the self-disciplinary practices of the colonized Indian male subject. At the same time, however, nationalist ascetics also became a domain through which to dominate marginalized castes, classes, religions, and genders.
Key Words the body; Mahatma Gandhi; colonialism; nationalism; asceticism

Indian asceticism held a central place in the imperial imagination of Britain. Explorers, travel writers, and scholars had long equated India with a religion, "Hinduism," and asserted that world renunciation was a defining feature of Indian society. World renunciation was first identified as a cultural ideal, and then held responsible for numerous "inadequacies" in the Indian character. British colonial discourse blamed

the purported renunciation of sociopolitical realities within Hinduism for producing otherworldly and indolent colonized subjects, who were physically weak and indifferent to their sociopolitical conditions. Indian nationalist leaders and literati were strongly influenced by such denigration of the weak Hindu male in colonial discourse. It prompted them to engage in varied attempts to reform their religion and themselves. Mahatma Gandhi, aka Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi (1869–1948), too, focused his critical attention on his body, and subsequently on the bodies of others, with the intent of improving the colonized male body so that it could become strong, disciplined, and socially productive. Gandhi's leadership of the nationalist movement in India and his innovative response to colonial discourse turned him into an iconic figure in the 1920s and 30s, and he continues to be remembered as the father of the Indian nation in contemporary times.

In this essay, I draw upon examples from Gandhi's life as portrayed in his *Autobiography* (1927), or, what he preferred to call *The Story of My Experiments with Truth*, to argue that the body assumed critical importance in Gandhi's anti-colonial movement because of British colonial discourse that inscribed difference on the bodies of its subjects to construct its own authority and legitimacy. The *Autobiography* demonstrates that Gandhi's understanding of his body — gendered, religious, racialized, and classed — was shaped by colonial relations of power.[1] Building upon the insights of French philosopher Michel Foucault, who places the body at the center of the struggle between different formations of power/knowledge, this essay examines how different discursive formations, in this case British colonial and Indian nationalist, inscribed the body differently in their respective "regimes of truth." Responding to colonial criticisms, Gandhi reworked Hindu ascetic practices to formulate an anticolonial discourse that restructured the body's economy of pleasures prioritizing self-discipline in the service of the nation. He reframed celibacy, renunciation of family, renunciation of material wealth, and restrictions in diet as ascetic practices for the nation seeking to bring about behavioral changes in the population. Cultivating a disciplined body and mind assumed singular importance in Gandhi's political praxis (see, for example, Alter; Chakraborty, Chapter 3). For Gandhi, nationalist asceticism functioned as a "technology of the self" (Foucault), as essential to the process of ethical formation, as certain types of bodies, behaviors, and desires were constituted in and through the self-disciplinary practices of the colonized Indian subject. At the same time, however, nationalist asceticism became a dominating discourse that functioned to marginalize myriad others as well as other ways of resisting British colonial ideologies and practices.

British Discourse on Hindu Asceticism and Hindu Masculinity

Western scholars, missionaries, and administrators produced a discourse on Hindu asceticism that profoundly influenced generations of Western and Indian subjects. To James Mill, renowned for his three-volume *The History of British India*, completed in 1817, which became the prescribed textbook on India for British officers of the Indian Civil Service (Thapar, "Interpreting" 6), the Hindu ascetic signified "an absolute renunciation of all moral duties, and moral affections" (*History* 1: 294). In his widely acclaimed *Homo Hierarchichus*, the anthropologist Louis Dumont argued that "[a]sceticism, not only as a way of salvation, but as a general orientation, the tendency towards a negation of the world . . . ha[s] deeply imbued Hindus" (273). He contended that the individual in Hindu society does not exist in the domain of the worldly householder (grhasta) who is enmeshed in nonindividuated caste society, but in the domain of the world renouncing sannyasi, whom he described as the "individual-outside-the-world" (275). Another well-known scholar John Campbell Oman characterized Hindu monasticism as "gloomy religious abnegation" and as "adverse to patriotism in any form" (*Mystics* 15, 275). Attributing religious detachment to a lack of patriotism, Oman goes on to establish the lack of Indian martial spirit. The missionary-scholar John Nicol Farquhar also saw no virtue in the Hindu notion of renunciation, since, in his view, the Hindu ascetic is "not a servant of humanity" (*Primer* 197). He asserted that unlike Christianity Hinduism lacks the moral vigor to stir "men and women to unselfish service" (*Crown* 277); that "Hindu philosophy . . . leads to inaction" (277); and that Hindu renunciation springs from "indifference" (294).

Relying on this dominant Western understanding of Hindu asceticism, the British viewed the participation of Hindu and Muslim ascetics in the material world — as traders, warriors, and social activists — as an anomaly and as an obstacle to Company rule. The close contact of ascetics with the peasant countryside was seen as a matter for concern, when the British recognized that "monks depended on peasants for agrarian labor, material sustenance, and monastic recruitment; peasants looked to monks for spiritual guidance, religious knowledge, and ideological leadership" (Pinch, *Peasants* 2). Such interdependence coupled with the spiritual authority of the monks, the British worried would allow them to easily incite and lead the masses to rebel against foreign domination. Further, historical evidence of the Hindu ascetic "emerg[ing] as the symbol of dissent and protest" (Thapar, "Cultural" 13) during sociopolitical struggles (such as, most notably, in the 1857 Mutiny-Rebellion) made them suspects whenever there was a widespread movement of unrest.

In essence, the ability of Hindu and Muslim ascetics to engage the masses in anticolonial uprisings was perceived as a potential threat to Company rule (see Pinch; Dasgupta), and later officials of the East India Company specifically shaped

an imperial vision of Indian asceticism as a social and political obstacle to Britain's "humane" imperialism. Seeking to contain the moral authority of the ascetic, the British focused their imperial gaze on wandering holy men, warrior ascetics, and powerful landowning families of hereditary monks. The administrative concern with establishing a sedentary population of identifiable tribes and castes led to the merging of the figure of the ascetic with "powerful wandering and/or predatory groups" that expressed authority "through plunder or by collecting tribute" (Freitag 235). Colonel William Henry Sleeman's sensational history of thuggee/thagi (banditry) — "that extraordinary fraternity of assassins" (297) in *The Thugs or Phansigars of India* — is an excellent illustration of the British claim that Hindu asceticism produced criminals in ochre robes who raided and murdered the local populace. Soon, legislations by the colonial state such as the Penal Code (1833), the Thagi Act (1836), and the Criminal Tribes Act (1872) criminalized the militant, wandering Muslim and Hindu ascetics, as well as other nomadic groups.

Evidently, the linking of colonial knowledge and power worked to effectively differentiate between legitimate and illegitimate forms of ascetic practices and to mark out certain ascetic bodies for punishment under colonial law. The British wanted docile and detached renunciates who could be easily governed; not militant, wandering monks raiding their treasuries, obstructing the collection of taxes, and provoking rural unrest. Colonial representations in literature, history, anthropology, and missionary writings, among others, collectively produced and circulated the "truth" about Hindu asceticism as a world-renouncing doctrine, while colonial legislations punished those ascetics who did not meet this criterion of detachment from the sociopolitical realm. As colonial discourse successfully regulated relations of power between the colonizer and the colonized, with the colonizer marking certain kinds of ascetics as criminals and then claiming to protect the colonized from those same criminals (i.e. law-breaking militant ascetics), they became what Foucault calls "regimes of truth." In *Discipline and Punish*, Foucault charts the transition in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century from punishment that was ceremonial and directed at the prisoner's body in the form of public execution and corporal punishment to the invention of the prison, where the body is arranged, regulated, and supervised rather than tortured. To borrow from Foucault, as the formation of a corpus of knowledge, techniques, and 'scientific' discourses became entangled with the practice of the power to punish, a new "regime of the truth" emerged (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*30). Thus, in the context of colonial India, Hindu asceticism emerges not as a surplus residue of pre-modern India, but as a historically specific production and circulation of Western discourses that function as "truth." As Foucault writes, "Each society has its regime of truth, its 'general politics' of truth; that is, the types of discourse which it accepts

and makes function as true" (qtd in Hall and Gieben 295). It is no surprise then that the Indian feudal classes and the English-educated middle-classes came to accept this new "'general politics' of truth." They accepted the dominant colonial representation of Indian ascetics as otherworldly (passive and indifferent to their sociopolitical reality) as well as worldly (a threat to law and order and to the native populace) and internalized the colonial views on the negative effects of asceticism on Indian men.

The British argued that the civilizational ideal of renunciation had made the Indian elite passive to their sociopolitical condition, while a hot, humid climate, a vegetarian diet, early marriage, and the lack of a physical tradition — among a litany of other problems — had produced physically weak male bodies lacking in self-control. Since such physically and morally weak men could not be trusted to take on the reigns of the government, colonial rule was presented as necessary for India to emerge as a nation. James Mill, for example, concluded that the "listless apathy and corporeal weakness of the natives of Hindustan" (1: 333) made them "excel in the qualities of a slave" (2: 365). Sir O'Moore Creagh argued that since the "unwarlike classes," which came from the "Kayasth, Brahmin, and Bania castes," comprised the bulk of the Indian National Congress, handing over power to these "tyrannical" classes, which had for centuries oppressed the masses, would cause intense popular resentment (16, 233). The imperial mission then was purportedly a philanthropic project that would protect the masses from the tyrannical upper classes as well as from the armed, martial castes and militant Hindu ascetics, and teach the natives to govern themselves.

With the pernicious effects of Indian asceticism on Indian manhood offering explanation for colonial subjecthood and becoming the rationale for denying Indians the right to self-rule, the colonized elite came to embody the "crisis" — or the widely discussed crisis — in masculinity (Sinha 1-32). Consequently, they strived to build moral character and cultivate physical strength, so that they could prove their masculinity and claim their right to self-government (see Rosselli; Chakraborty 25-26). Bodily reform, both personal and collective, offered the possibility of purging the colonizer and rejuvenating the national body politic. Mahatma Gandhi insisted, for instance, that "it is . . . better to suffer the Pindari peril . . . than to seek unmanly protection" from the British and thus "become emasculated and cowardly" (*Hind Swaraj* 44). As nationalist leaders such as Mahatma Gandhi, Sri Aurobindo, Swami Vivekananda, Sri Dayananda Saraswati, M.S. Golwalkar, among others, directed their attention to reform their religion and their bodies, ascetic practices for the nation or nationalist asceticism emerged as an innovative means for the elite to employ a telos of collective ascetics as a means of transforming themselves. Through nationalist asceticism the elite hoped to replace British representations of the passive, apathetic

Indian with political entities involved in ethical and responsible nation-building work.

Gandhi: From Eating Meat to Wearing the Loincloth

Gandhi's life illustrates very well how both the subject Gandhi and his nationalist constructions of the Indian male body are produced within the limits set by colonial discourse. This section focuses on select examples from Gandhi's life as portrayed in the *Autobiography* to trace Gandhi's capitulation to British normative discourse on Hindu masculinity in his youth that prompt him to "experiment" with himself as subject. Similar to Joseph Alter, I argue that from his multiple personal experiments with diet, clothing, and sexuality, among others, Gandhi moves on to conduct collective experiments on the bodies of others, which include mass fasting, mass demonstrations, mass courting of arrest, and collective living in his ashrams.

Gandhi self-represents himself as a weak and timid child in the *Autobiography*. He writes, "I was a coward. I used to be haunted by the fear of thieves, ghosts, and serpents. I did not dare to stir out of doors at night. Darkness was a terror to me" (34). The effects of Western regimes of truth on the colonized who is subjected to its discourse is evident in the first experiment recorded in the *Autobiography*: Gandhi's childhood eating of meat in response to the dominant colonial attribution of Hindu cowardice to a vegetarian diet. Gandhi's experimentation with meat explicitly reveals that colonial regimes of truth produced subjects who personified the dominant perceptions and assumptions about Hindu (frequently used as a synonym for Indian) cowardice and physical weakness. For as Gandhi sates, he was influenced by a rhyme (composed by the Gujarati poet Narmad) popular among schoolboys that attributed the political and physical power of the British to meat-eating: "Behold the mighty Englishman / He rules the Indian small, / Because being a meat-eater / He is five cubits tall" (35).

This juxtaposition of the "mighty Englishman" against the "small" Indian was a product of the British attribution of the inability to fight to the vegetarian diet of the Hindus. Growing up in a vegetarian household, the young Gandhi desires to overcome his "innate" Hindu weakness and cowardice and become brave and muscular. As he writes: "I wished to be strong and daring and wanted my countrymen also to be such, so that we might defeat the English and make India free" (*Autobiography* 35). Following the dominant paradigm of imperial masculinity, Gandhi associates eating meat with masculine prowess. He believes that "meat-eating was good, that it would make me strong and daring, and that, if the whole country took to meat-eating, the English could be overcome" (35). Therefore, defying his family's adherence to vegetarianism, Gandhi begins to eat meat, which he understands as a nationalist "duty." Thus, at a very young age, we notice the effects of Western regimes of truth on

Gandhi that prompt him to renounce familiar traditions and practices and experiment with novel ideas as a way to reform his body and establish his manhood.

However, unwilling to eat meat in secrecy, Gandhi decides to renounce the consumption of meat until after the death of his parents (37). Later, in order to receive his family's consent to travel to England to pursue a law degree, he takes a vow "not to touch wine, women and meat" (51). Much of the account of his three years in England is about the obstacles to his vow of vegetarianism: the absence of vegetarian restaurants, the happiness after finding a vegetarian restaurant, the temptations from friends and colleagues to eat meat, and his feelings of alienation because of not eating meat. At one point, to compensate for his vegetarianism, Gandhi makes attempts at "cultivating other accomplishments which fitted one for polite society" (61). He states that "to make up for my vegetarianism," "I undertook the all too impossible task of becoming an English gentleman" (61). *The Autobiography* provides details about Gandhi buying fashionable clothes, styling his hair "in the correct fashion," trying to learn to play violin, and taking "lessons in dancing, French and elocution" (61-2). However, after three months, Gandhi abandoned his endeavor to cultivate a persona fit for "polite [English] society" (61), although he continued to be alert to the significant role of clothing in public life.

Emma Tarlo suggests that Gandhi's first week in South Africa where he arrives to take up his job as a barrister representing Indian rights "marked a turning-point in Gandhi's attitude to dress" (67). A magistrate asks Gandhi, who is dressed immaculately in European attire, to remove his Indian headgear, and Gandhi leaves the court in protest. When Gandhi writes to the press to highlight this incident, it gives him "an unexpected advertisement" and Gandhi realizes that rather than adopting socially appropriate clothing as in his England years, he could adopt "socially unacceptable and provocative" clothing productively to expose injustice and embarrass others (Tarlo 67). Thus, throughout his stay in South Africa, Gandhi experimented with different kinds of headgear, clothing, and shoes. When he finally returned to India from South Africa, he arrived dressed as a Kathiawadi peasant, keenly aware of the public attention that this would generate. In India, too, he frequently experimented with his attire, and, finally, after a great deal of deliberation, he adopted the "loincloth" in September 1921.2Through his adoption of the loincloth, Gandhi hoped to distance himself from both elitism and orthodox class politics and align with the Indian lower classes and lower castes. It was not a religious act or a sign of asceticism, but an intentional body practice. He explained his sartorial choice as "the dress of necessity not desire" (Tarlo 74) that would expose India's dire poverty to the world-at-large, and thereby encourage all Indians to weave and spin in order to clothe everyone. But the masses read Gandhi's shaved head, barely clad, and

emaciated body as a sign of his saintliness drawing associations with the many Hindu sannyasis, Muslim fakirs, and Sufi pirs who wore the loincloth. Asceticism emerged as a central aspect of his far-reaching mass appeal. He was revered as an ascetic: a saint who had voluntarily accepted a position of powerlessness through his physical identification with "the poorest of the poor among Indians," "the semi-starved almost naked villager" (*Collected Works* 24: 456; 47: 119). By successfully adopting aspects of the world-renouncing ascetic of colonial discourse, Gandhi set himself apart from existing figures of power — English-educated Indians and local kings — and he was looked upon as "an alternative source of authority" (Amin 338). Gandhi's authority was derived from his innumerable sacrifices for the masses: his rejection of sexual activity, his restricted diet, numerous fasts, his scantily clad body, the pilgrimages on foot, and his numerous internments.

Nationalist Asceticism as "Technology of the Self"

Gandhi's multiple "experiments" in the attempt to emerge as a self-controlled subject with a meticulously cultivated, disciplined body illuminates how Western regimes of truth that elicited Gandhi's initial self-reproach also prompted him to contest and alter colonial views of Hindu religion and masculinity. While colonial discourse attributed Indian effeminacy and apathy as essentially unchanging and natural attributes, Gandhi argued that human bodies are malleable, drawing upon his own shifting understanding of his body and providing evidence from the numerous experiments he conducted on his own body. By displaying a voluntary commitment to ascetic practices for the nation, Gandhi hoped that the colonized male subject would demonstrate to the British his moral fortitude, self-control, and courage. At the same time, Gandhi's veneration as Mahatma, literally, *maha* (Great) and *atma* (Soul), and as Bapu, the father of the nation, resulted in his discourse on the colonized Indian body to become a dominant and dominating discourse, a means to define and police the normal and the deviant. Thus, Gandhian nationalist asceticism, which is the product of a particular encounter between Britain and India, in turn produced history. Gandhi's nationalist asceticism acquired a sense of authority becoming a new regime of truth in a critical era of India's struggle for liberation from colonial domination.

Similar to Foucault's "technology of the self", which, as Foucault explains, implies "certain modes of training and modification of individuals" that allow people to transform "their own bodies and souls, thoughts, conduct, and way of being" ("Technology" 225), Gandhi developed a code of self-cultivation, a set of guidelines for a relation to the self that defines the bourgeois nationalist self and its claim to power and self-rule (Also see, Foucault, *History* 1:120–31). His telos of collective ascetics was not employed repressively against others as a means of control, but was

developed as a means of transforming himself. Through his own multiple attempts at bodily reform, Gandhi sought to teach his fellow countrymen to cultivate their own bodies and, consequently, mount a critique of Western theories on the colonized Indian male body.

For instance, after many struggles to maintain his vow of vegetarianism in London, Gandhi comes across Henry Salt's *Plea for Vegetarianism* and becomes involved with the London Vegetarian Society, and this produces a shift in his understanding of vegetarianism. He now comes to consider vegetarianism as a moral virtue and becomes a vegetarian by choice (*Autobiography* 59). He also reverses his earlier equation between meat-eating and masculine strength: "it is easy to see that Vegetarianism is not only not injurious, but on the contrary is conducive to bodily strength and that attributing the Hindu weakness to Vegetarianism is simply based on a fallacy" (*Collected Works* 1: 33). Here, Gandhi successfully overturns the normalization of a meat-eating imperial masculinity in colonial discourse that produced and then maintained relations of dominance and subordination between the colonizer and the colonized. At the same time, Gandhi's strict adherence to, and celebration of, a vegetarian diet also played an important role in how colonized Indians came to be ranked relative to one another on the scale of nationalist masculinity. Eating a sparse meal devoid of meat was a requirement, if one had to join Gandhi's nationalist movement (which all right-thinking and patriotic sons of the soil were expected to do) or reside in his ashrams as a disciple. As Gandhi's dietary prescriptions emerged as the dominant nationalist dietary norm, nationalist asceticism became an enactment of power. In addition, Gandhi's model of the vegetarian nationalist subject got quickly aligned with brahmanical Hinduism that could then assert its dominance over meat-eating Muslims, Christians, lower-caste Hindus, and outcasts or untouchables. While Gandhi repeatedly directed attention to rural poverty and the ethics of (excessive) consumption to urge Indians to control their desire for food and limit the intake of food, Gandhi's authority as Mahatma in effect established differential relations of power between colonized Indian subjects on the basis of their dietary habits and choices.

Sexual control, which was at the crux of Gandhi's nationalist ascetics, was yet another contested site of power. The British associated the colonized's self-control with his suitability as a political subject and utilized the categorizations of Indian Muslims as "hypermasculine" and Hindus as "effeminate" to reject Indian claims to self-rule. Gandhi recognized that masculinity as action, as doing, rather than as identity, held the possibility of change. He reframed the practice of celibacy and the renunciation of family life (which were stages in a Hindu man's life, according to the classical ashram life cycle) as matters of choice. Arguing that the desire for sex

and material prosperity were impediments to the performance of ethical and political duties, he reserved the transformation of desire (for food, sex, or wealth) into heroism for disciplined and self-controlled Gandhians (or *satyagrahis* — literally, seekers of Truth). Thus, Gandhi conceptualized the vow of *brahmacharya* as requiring not only celibacy and sexual restraint but also control over all the senses: "So overpowering are the senses that they can be kept under control only when they are completely hedged in on all sides . . ." (*Autobiography* 199). However, "[t]hat brahmacharya which can be observed only by living in a forest is neither brahmacharya nor self-control" (*Collected Works* 27: 152) because the really pure are those who desire bodily pleasures but have cultivated a strong will that allows them to renounce bodily pleasures.

Gandhi argues that to combine being a householder with celibacy is higher and purer than the state of sexual activity. For him, celibacy represents sexual energy not dissipated by sexual activity, and he urges a self-imposed restriction — a radical abstention from sex to preserve semen, the "vital fluid" (*Collected Works* 34: 372) — in order to build up spiritual, physical, and mental strength through a struggle against desire. He writes, "Manliness consists in struggling. It is such struggling that moulds us" (33: 433). Unwillingness to practice sexual self-restraint is a sign of cowardice: "A man who is unchaste loses stamina, becomes emasculated and cowardly" (*Hind Swaraj* 97). Further, Gandhi insists that early sexual experience not only emasculates men, it also produces "a race of cowardly, emasculated and spiritless creatures" (*Collected Works* 12: 136). That is, self-restraint is critical for the production of a strong progeny. Such reworking of the ascetic ideal of celibacy and sexual renunciation as service to the nation reveals that sexuality is historically constituted and does not exist independently of the meaning we assign it. Yet, celibacy, as Julius J. Lipner notes, "was par excellence a Brahmin, male prerogative" (56). Thus, as the "self" assumes the position of both subject and object of ethical discourse, brahmanical asceticism signifies manliness. Also, by positing brahmacharya as central to the performance of political and ethical responsibilities, Gandhi privileges the male discourse on sexuality, in that it comes to define both male and female sexuality. For him, sexuality is exclusively about male desire for power and domination and brahmacharya is a technique to control these urges, if not eradicate them completely. *The Age of Consent Act* (1891) aimed to increase the legal age of sexual intercourse for Hindu child brides, but Gandhi asks for the renunciation of what is "legal," namely marital sex, through the choice of celibacy.[3] While offering men the possibility of transforming their personal and political lives, this new husbandly code of honor, however, continued to deny women sexual agency and subjectivity.[4]

At the same time, Gandhi's encouragement of women's participation in

the political realm and attempts to feminize the anti-colonial struggle offered a resounding challenge to British colonial ideologies and institutional practices. Gandhi argued, "aggression was the path to mastery of those without self-control, nonviolent resistance the path of those with control" (Rudolph and Rudolph 31). He insisted that European nations have not yet earned the distinction of being true nations because of their adoption of violence (Steger 102-3). Therefore, rejecting British colonial discourse that sought to teach the "native" how to self-govern themselves, Gandhi offered nonviolent resistance or *satyagraha* — an innovative discourse of moral and political reform linked to bodily practices that reworked "feminine" practices, such as spinning, weaving, suffering hunger, and enduring assaults on the body, as the primary mode of political resistance. Rejecting outright the call for the adoption of violence as a means to free India from colonial rule by the Extremist faction within the Indian National Congress, Gandhi's embodied politics rallied Indians to refute British charges of effeminacy without having to emulate British imperial masculinity or the "martial races" (such as the Gurkhas, Sikhs, Muslims, and Marathas) approved by the British. Colonial discourse focused attention on the body of the colonized Indian as effeminate and non-martial to consolidate its power; Gandhi, too, made the body a site to affirm his power and authority. In other words, colonial discourse opened up a space for Gandhi, the subject who was subjected by colonial discourse, to subject colonial discourse to critique and interrogation; for, as Foucault alerts us, power is both repressive and productive.

The meaning of Gandhi's term *satyagraha*, from *sat* (truth) and *agraha* (firmness), is soul-force or truth-force (*Autobiography* 292). He explains, "ahimsa [nonviolence] is a renunciation out of strength and not out of weakness" (*Collected Works* 14: 485). It is intentional and purposeful suffering that evolves from within by individual effort. Gandhi writes, "India feels weak and helpless and so expresses her helplessness by hating the tyrant…." Non-cooperation can make the people "strong and self-reliant" as well as "transform hatred into pity" (19: 81). He believes that nonviolent resistance has the potential to transform both the performative subject and those witnessing the performance. Theorizing resistance as visible collective acts, Gandhi adopted practices of mass participation in his nationalist movement, such as non-cooperation with the law, demonstrations, strikes, courting of mass-scale arrests, and mass fasting, to make visible the injustices of colonial rule and increase the ability of the colonized to work in unity to oppose such injustice. Gandhi envisioned satyagraha as socially inclusive. He hoped to forge alliances across Indian communities that transcended religious and social divisions (*Autobiography* 126) through his call for *sarvodaya* (service towards others). In addition, through exhibitionist, public acts of defiance, Gandhi sought to provoke the colonizer to

employ violence. The "legal" violence of the colonizer could then be turned into shame, while the nonviolent, suffering colonized resister or victim could emerge as a figure of pity and glory. Gandhi believed that large-scale displays of self-suffering by the collective would eventually weaken the colonial government's resolve, embarrass them, and compel them to discontinue the use of violence.

Similar to the shift of modern power from its focus on the body to the soul of the prison inmate or the modern citizen that Foucault discusses in *Discipline and Punish*, the Gandhian regime of truth also directs attention to the psyche, conscience, and morality of the civil resister. For Gandhi, the human body is merely a tool to achieve greater things, such as a moral self, an ethical nation, or an egalitarian society. The nonviolent refusal to cooperate with injustice requires that "feeble physiques" (*Collected Works* 32: 444) reflecting modern forms of indulgence to be replaced with bodies "as strong as steel" (15: 55; 26: 143). He conceives his ashrams as centers to produce disciplined minds and bodies that can endure the hardships of satyagraha. He even referred to them as perfect training grounds for "right men" and "right Indians" (qtd in Steger 119). Gandhian nationalist asceticism has as its goal the creation of new persons through the patterning of behavior. The self-disciplinary technologies of the satyagrahis reflect Gandhi's political economy of the body, which invests the body with utility "only if it is both a productive body and a subjected body" (Foucault, *Discipline and Punish* 26). Gandhi asserts, "It is difficult to become a passive resister, unless the body is trained" and "where there is no strength of mind, there can be no strength of soul" (*Hind Swaraj* 96). The civil resister then has to train his/her mind to be able to put the body on the line, to accept and endure physical pain, and to overcome sensations of pain and suffering experienced by the physical body. By systematic training, self-reflection, self-monitoring, and confession, the Gandhian ascetic nationalist becomes a transformed subject, who is physically trained and psychologically motivated to strive for a different life. Self-discipline, self-improvement, self-introspection, renunciation for the national good, and participation in the nationalist struggle are effects of this particular regime of power and knowledge, as nationalist asceticism becomes a technique to control whole populations by turning them into docile bodies that participate in their own self-regulation.

Foucault's genealogy of "the disappearance of torture as a public spectacle" (*Discipline and Punish* 7) illuminates how different regimes of truth produced and disciplined the body of the criminal in France. While corporal punishment was a ritual in which the audience performed the important role of re-establishing the authority and power of the sovereign, in the late eighteenth century discipline becomes privatized and individualized within the penal institution. But Foucault's focus on Europe does not take into account the situation in the imperial colonies where theatrical displays of

power continued to inscribe violence on the body of the condemned. In late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century British India violent exhibitionism was critical to the display of imperial power. British administrators frequently employed public flogging, hanging, and shooting along with imprisonment to deter resisters and control political agitators. A seminal event in this context is the Jallianwala Bagh massacre in Amritsar on April 13, 1919, where General Reginald E.H. Dyer fired at a crowd of nonviolent protestors killing between 379 to 1000 people. After the Jallianwala Bagh massacre, Gandhi, who was initially convinced that "India could achieve her complete emancipation only within and through the British Empire" (*Autobiography* 203), rejected British law. In 1921 he launched the non-cooperation movement with a call for the abandonment and rejection of British law courts. In his arrest and trial (March 1922) for the leadership of the movement, he explained his own trajectory "from a staunch loyalist and co-operator" to someone who had "become an uncompromising disaffectionist and non-co-operator" (*Collected Works* 23: 114-18).

Pointing to a new moral economy in the penal institution, Foucault writes, "The punishment-body relation is not the same as it was in the torture during public executions. The body now serves as an instrument or intermediary: if one intervenes upon it to imprison it, or to make it work, it is in order to deprive the individual of a liberty that is regarded both as a right and as property…. From being an art of unbearable sensations punishment has become an economy of suspended rights" (*Discipline and Punish* 11). Practices of segregation, restricted diet, restricted movements, enforced labor, and a regimented schedule all worked to deprive the liberty of the individual in the prison, but it became "the most hidden part of the penal process" (9). In addition, incarceration marked one as a criminal, an object of shame. Gandhi an astute lawyer-turned-politician sought to demonstrate how in the colonial penal institution violence continued to be written on the criminalized bodies of the colonized. Thus, for instance, when Gandhi was imprisoned in Johannesburg in 1908 for failing to register under the Asiatic Law Amendment Act, but was exempted from the prison regulations for black South Africans because he was Indian, Gandhi accepted them voluntarily. He asked for his hair to be cropped and his moustache to be shaved off. When the authorities declined, Gandhi cropped his own hair and even spent two hours cropping the hair of fellow Indian inmates. Thus, he successfully subverted the colonial formulation of differentiated otherness, and the consequent rejection of the positions that the British had mapped onto their colonized subjects (Indian and African). In addition, while the state used prison rules to visibly mark sovereign power on disobedient bodies, with the aim of transforming resistant bodies into compliant bodies, Gandhi chose to inscribe on his body the violence of imprisonment. Thus, during his imprisonments, Gandhi would frequently fast, observe

a vow of silence, restrict his food intake, and wear humiliating clothes to embarrass the colonial authorities.

Gandhi as Mahatma

Gandhi's practices of self-transformation reveal how his understanding of his own body, and the bodies of others, interacted with circulating discourses (legal, scientific, political, religious, and so on) and sociopolitical practices in the late nineteenth century, so that his embodied practices were always contextual and shifting. From his childhood self-image of cowering before the "mighty," meat-eating Englishman, he goes on to offer an embodied politics of nonviolence that challenges both Western constructions of the Indian body and the colonial inscription of bodily difference.

Gandhi's detailed reflections on, and descriptions of, his failures, which prompted him to perform new experiments on his body or to revise his techniques publicly demonstrates his many trials for the national good. Written in weekly installments in *Navajivan*, the *Autobiography* offers fragments and scripted "experiments with truth" from Gandhi's life that illustrate the slow, painstaking process involved in Gandhi's self-transformation. So that Bhikhu Parekh suggests that we call it "an autobiographical biography" (289) because it is "really a story of how he evolved into a Mahâtmâ" (288), or "a biography of Gandhi written by the Mahâtmâ" (289). These "experiments with truth" effectively establish his power, which is "distinct from both priestly power and the coercive authority of the state" (Thapar, "Cultural" 13). Scholars note that the rural masses' faith in Gandhi as Mahatma frequently solicited their participation in the non-cooperation movement. The masses read Gandhi's body within pre-existing patterns of popular belief. Their faith in the power of deities was transplanted on to the Mahatma, a saint added to the Hindu pantheon, who they believed could produce miracles.[5] This modality of devotional embodiment locates power in Gandhi as a transcendent, divine source, rather than attributing agency to the productive, performative body of the ascetic nationalist subject, the satyagrahi. Thus, as Gandhi's emaciated loincloth-wrapped body consolidates his claim to nationalist leadership and to mahatma-hood, it functions as a tactical element in the functioning of different relations of power. Gandhi's rejection of power in its various manifestations — political, economic, and social — is interpreted as proof of his spiritual authority. As Subaltern Studies scholars have argued it is not Gandhi's political praxis that convinced the masses to put their faith in the Mahatma but rather his religious charisma and the masses' perception of him as capable of removing the colonial affliction (Amin, "Gandhi" 331).[6]

Gandhi was also alert to the close connection between Indian ascetics and the rural populace in colonial India and the ability of ascetics to motivate the masses to

resist structures of domination. He solicited and authorized the participation of Hindu ascetics in the nationalist movement. Gandhi argued that the metaphysics of world renunciation in the practice of classical sannyasa is an escape into self-centeredness; renunciation is futile unless it manifests itself in selfless service and social reform: "In this age, only political sannyasis can fulfil and adorn the ideal of sannyasa, others will more than likely disgrace the sannyasi's saffron garb . . . one who aspires to a truly religious life cannot fail to undertake public service as his mission, and we are today so much caught up in the political machine that service of the people is impossible without taking part in politics" (Iyer 1:138). The participation of Hindu ascetics in the anti-colonial movement with sannyasis changing their ochre robes to Gandhi's *khadi* (hand woven, hand spun cloth) proved the fallacy of the orientalist notion that Indian society has always been otherworldly because of the appeal of renunciation. In addition, it troubled the neat separation of asceticism and politics in British colonial discourse, as Gandhi demonstrated that subjectivities are constituted and self-constituting within particular discursive formations.

Gandhi's reworking of Hindu asceticism and the soliciting of Hindu ascetics to participate in his non-cooperation movement offers a novel account of the emergence and contradictory character of nationalist ascetics.While British knowledge/ power produced and consolidated new notions of Hindu asceticism (itself a diverse phenomenon), it also offered an entry point for Indian nationalist leaders to craft their notions of what constitutes the self, as both a subject in the colony and a citizen of the nation-to-be. Gandhi took religion and its associated practices out of the private realm and into the body politic, which opened up possibilities for both the purportedly "unworldly" and "criminal" Hindu ascetics to participate in politics as well as for the physically and morally "weak" householder to perform asceticism for the nation. In other words, "truth isn't outside power, or deprived of power": on the contrary, truth "is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraints [a]nd it induces regular effects of power" (qtd in Hall and Gieben 295).

Gandhi's discourse of nationalist asceticism, which was effected by and was an effect of colonial discourse, illuminates that traditions and histories are disrupted not just by those who employ discourse, but also by those who are subjected to it. From his personal bodily experiments, Gandhi embarks on a national program to reform the body politic. Subverting the colonial regime of truth, he produces an oppositional economy of bodies that demonstrates that the colonial state did not have a monopoly over power. As nationalist asceticism emerges as the new regime of truth in India in the 1920s and 30s, it constitutes other categories of difference, as much as it fragments existing social categories. Nationalist asceticism becomes a domain through which to dominate marginalized castes, classes, religions, and genders as the making of

bodies and simultaneously the body politic through nationalist asceticism necessitates definitional others as material effects of nationalist discourse.

Notes

1. This essay draws upon my book, *Masculinity, Asceticism, Hinduism*, particularly, Chapters 1 & 3.
2. Gandhi's attire of a short dhoti was not really a loincloth, but was characterized as such by scholars and the press.
3. The Age of Consent Act raised the age of consent for sexual intercourse for all girls, married or unmarried, from ten to twelve years in all jurisdictions, its violation subject to criminal prosecution as rape. Scholars have argued how this legislation was viewed by the Hindu elite as British encroachment in their domestic lives and became a rallying ground for Hindu men to assert their control over women (see, for example, Sinha Chapter 4).
4. For a detailed analysis of the female body in Gandhian discourse, see Chakraborty 133-135.
5. See Shahid Amin's excellent study of the rumors concerning Gandhi's miraculous powers points to the deification of Gandhi.
6. In his *Autobiography* Gandhi presents himself as "a victim" of the masses' deification. He expresses anger and frustration for his inability to sleep, eat, meditate, or travel freely for the masses' perception of his body as holy and their obstinate quest for his holy sight, or *darshan* (352).

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