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**Disorientating the Orient and Disoriented Orients: Said, Derrida and the ‘Satnav’  
Paradox**

It is the last week of July 1905 and a postcard has been dispatched from Cabourg to someone staying in room 165 at the Grand Hotel in Royat (which had the rather grand name of ‘Royat-les-Bains’ at the time). Until we look at the card, these facts seem utterly unremarkable, as it is probably one of the thousands of postcards sent that week in France. Why, however, should this particular postcard retain our attention?

As a starting point, let us note Jacques Derrida’s comments on the postcard’s combination of intimacy and public exhibition: ‘si la carte postale est une sorte de lettre ouverte [...] on peut toujours [...] tenter de la rendre indéchiffrable [...]’.<sup>1</sup> This is just it, for most of us the public face of this card is totally opaque: it is incomprehensible if we cannot read Gujarati. And yet, even if we are one of the 41 million speakers of that language, the sounds the characters form make no sense unless the Gujarati speaker could also speak French. This double condition required for comprehension increases exponentially the exclusivity of the document. It is necessary to extend the terms of Roman Jakobson’s 1960 General Schema of Communication to interpret it. The postcard therefore requires two linguistic keys to decipher the twin code which carries its intimate message:<sup>2</sup> ‘Je n’ai rien reçu aujourd’hui, ni carte ni lettre. J’espère avoir beaucoup demain matin. Madeleine et moi avons fait ce soir une promenade. Comme c’est monotone, quand tu n’es pas là. A toi, toujours ta fidèle Soonni’.<sup>3</sup> The actual message itself is heartfelt, touching even, but otherwise unremarkable. So, in order to justify why this document should retain our attention, we are led back to the identity and language mix of the postcard’s sender and addressee.

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<sup>1</sup> Jacques Derrida, *La Carte Postale: de Socrate à Freud et au-delà*, p. 41.

<sup>2</sup> Roman Jakobson, ‘Closing Statement: Linguistics and Poetics’ in Sebeok, Thomas A. (ed), *Style in Language*, p. 353 and p. 357.

<sup>3</sup> I am extremely grateful to Tata Central Archives and to Rajendraprasad Narla for granting permission to reproduce the postcard here.

The postcard was sent by a wife to her husband. The sender is Sooni Tata, who was born Suzanne Brière in Paris in 1880 and the addressee is Ratanji Dadabhoy ('R. D.') Tata, a prominent member of India's leading industrialist family at the time. Despite the fact that its contents are rather pedestrian and that it was sent at the national postage rate, this postcard captures our attention as a transnational language act. This suggests that these two individuals are in a different situation from almost certainly every other sender and receiver of a postcard sent in France in that week of the summer of 1905.

Gujarati is the ancestral language of the Tatas who are Parsis originating from that part of North West India. The use of Gujarati characters to communicate Mrs Tata's mother tongue of French (which her husband also speaks fluently because her mother was once R.D. Tata's French teacher) is not only an encryption. Clearly as such, it is intended to shield their communication from prying eyes; however, it also bears witness to the changes in self-image that Suzanne Brière has undergone since her marriage in 1902. This postcard is a demonstration of a continuing process of acculturation.

In the three years between 1902 and 1905 she travelled to Bohemia (now known as the Czech Republic), Switzerland, the United Kingdom, the United States and established an Indian home in Bombay (now known as Mumbai). The card also gives a sense of the limits of her acquisition of Indian cultures, because although she changed not only her surname, but also her first name, 'Sooni' meaning 'fair' in Gujarati, she cannot yet communicate in written Gujarati. The postcard is such a fascinating document because, it has a local and national context, it benefits from the experience of an earlier period of international travel and transcultural personal change because it decouples an 'oriental' language from its geographical context and ties it into a Western one in the West, namely French in France.

This postcard is therefore both an example of 'disorientating the Orient' and 'disoriented orients' because it does not only consist of the traveling of Gujarati speaker to France, in a linear fashion, but also of a creative coming together of both Gujarati and French. The resulting hybrid is a rare flower, a fragile piece of intimate communication which cloaks the words of the wife's mother tongue with the characters of her husband's home language. But it is this complex movement which characterizes all good examples

of the two objects of analysis in this essay: ‘disorientation of the Orient’ and ‘disorientated orients’.

The aims of this essay are fivefold: first, to interrogate the differences between both terms and to see if they can both be usefully combined. Second, to trace a brief genealogy of the two terms in relation to Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978) and to that text’s precursors, critiques of it by others and to a later text by the same author. Third, to examine how the terms overlap with the postmodern critical practice of Jacques Derrida’s deconstruction. These first three aims are methodological preliminaries that relate to definition. Once a better definition has been achieved, it is necessary to apply and test it; that is the purpose of the fourth and fifth aims addressed in the main body of this essay. Fourth, the usefulness of the terms will be assessed by applying them to the self-image of non-British women in Indian elites 1902–1948. And finally, the fifth aim is to interrogate critically the assumptions that underlie the terms and which should inform both their use and the limits of that use.

### Definitions

If we look first at ‘disorientating the Orient’, it appears to be a critical process, one which draws its force from critique of the ideological basis of Western colonialisms which was identified by Edward Said in *Orientalism* over thirty three years ago. This is the sense which the term acts with Said. As a term, however, ‘disorientating the Orient’ also questions (disorientates) what constitutes the Orient in Said’s study (which is predominantly the Middle East). Therefore since the term as a whole, doubles the ‘orient’, using a verb against a noun, it could be said that it also exploits the critical impetus of *Orientalism* against *Orientalism*.

If we are talking about developing *Orientalism*, we should consider precursors to that text and then rest of Said’s work. As far as precursors are concerned, texts such as Bernard Mouralis’s *Contre-littératures* (1975), present a clear critique of colonial ideology as the: ‘association étroite qui s’est souvent établie entre l’ethnographie et l’entreprise coloniale pour laquelle l’anthropologie “appliquée” ou “pratique” a pu effectivement constituer, comme on le sait, une pièce non négligeable dans la mise en

place d'un système de domination politique et sociale' (p. 189). Unlike Said, Mouralis acknowledges voices which resist this domination: him '[l]e texte négro-africain se définit ainsi par son opposition globale au monde européen et aux idéologies que véhicule celui-ci [...] La protestation contre la situation coloniale, la valorisation de la culture négro-africaine, la neutralisation des différents discours européens caractérisent indéniablement un processus de contre-littérature' (p. 191). Mouralis's study did not gain the prominence of *Orientalism* because it offers serial summary interpretations of whole works, rather than expansive text-immanent close readings, but its combination of critical of colonial structures with an engagement with non-European cultural production remains valid.

As is clear from the preface to *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), Said himself offers a corrective to the geographical reductionism of his earlier work: 'which was limited to the Middle East' (p. xi). Furthermore, Said also states that '[w]hat I left out of *Orientalism* was that response to Western dominance' both 'armed resistance' and 'cultural resistance' (p. xii). As Said states, *Culture and Imperialism*, however, is 'not a just a sequel of *Orientalism* but an attempt to do something else' (p. xii). Indeed, fair-minded critics have commented on how it presents another set of compelling, original analyses which are also problematic because they do not sufficiently account for the historical specificities of each of the additional regions Said covers. To illustrate this point with just one example; for Colin Graham, writing from an Irish Studies perspective, Said 'does not register the ambiguities of Ireland's position' in relation to Christianity and to Europe (it is precisely these sorts of ambiguities which I hope to allow to emerge in relation to an Macedonian-born nun active in India later in this essay).<sup>4</sup>

In this essay, the term 'disorientated orient' perhaps conveys this position after *Orientalism* in which monolithic alterity is challenged by giving voices people who confound the binaries between East and West, irrespective of their nationality. One example of this is the anti-colonial rhetoric of the French philosopher in Mohammed al-Muwaylihî's, *Trois Égyptiens à Paris*; he declares: '[i]l n'est en rien civilisé d'aller chez le Chinois [...] et de lui déclarer "Lève-toi, car nous venons t'apporter ce qui est juste et bon [...] Deviens Européen dans la Chine ancestrale et Occidental en Extrême-Orient"'

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<sup>4</sup> Colin Graham, 'Anomalous Theory', *The Irish Review*, 15, (Spring, 1994), 117–123, p. 119.

(pp. 43–44).<sup>5</sup> This quotation not only reverses the colonial gaze, but also cheats binary oppositional thinking by including a French voice and a completely different geographical context (Chinese in China) that is skeptical about the *mission civilisatrice*. In terms of perspective, the hybridizing recombination in this example is structurally similar to the creative combination of Gujarati and French in the Royat postcard, although al-Muwaylihi's writing clearly also has a critical edge that should be valued.

Even though we might prefer the 'easy' plural of 'disorientating orient', it is important not to neglect the critical turn of 'disorientation of the Orient', particularly if this critical awareness can be directed both at reified and reductive constructions of the Orient, as well as the shortcomings which have been subsequently identified in Said's critique of them.

It is important, in the light of this, to adopt an approach which combines both 'disorientation of the Orient' and 'disorientated orient'. It would be wrong to remove all the critical force of the second term by saying that it is the end result of the 'disorientation of the Orient', the state achieved after the action of 'disorientation of the Orient'. This is an error because it assumes a false chronological relation between the two terms which places 'disorientation of the Orient' first, and 'disorientated orient' second. The chronological relation is erroneous because we frequently need the critical force of Said's discourse (while realizing, partly with Said himself, in *Culture and Imperialism*, that what he says needs to be better adapted to specific historical and geographical contexts).<sup>6</sup> If a cause-and-effect relation is assumed between the two terms, it means that 'disorientated orient' comes to mean nothing more than an ethereal state of benevolent cosmopolitanism. Cosmopolitanism and multilingualism have been viewed positively among thinking people for millenia. However, a vague feeling that this is something positive that we would like for ourselves, does justice, neither to its constructedness nor to its fragility.

A concrete example of this constructedness and fragility is the way in which economic privilege and international travel are the preconditions for the postcard as a

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<sup>5</sup> French translation by Randa Sabry (Clichy: Éditions du Jasmin, 2008).

<sup>6</sup> 'The Latin American experience, which obviously works on a different agenda to the ones I was dealing with in the French and British empires.' See 'Edward Said: Response' in 'Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism*: A Symposium', *Social Text*, 40 (Autumn, 1994), 20–24, p. 20.

transcultural linguistic act. In methodological terms, ‘disoriented orients’ could fail the test of usefulness as a critical term because the people who profit from them are members of a small economic elite. Only in this way do they have the possibility to travel as individuals and the leisure to learn (for however long they wish).<sup>7</sup> Furthermore, we have seen that Sooni Tata’s use of Gujarati characters also betrays the limits of acculturation and, potentially, only a token engagement with a non-Western form of writing. Being critical, therefore, means that it is necessary to revisit her language use to see if her knowledge deepens. In the event, there is no extant correspondence on this issue and Mrs Tata died of tuberculosis, twenty one years later in 1923, aged 43 (she gave birth to five children during this time).

In order to preserve the critical edge of the first term and the decenteredness of the second, it is necessary to combine them: ‘disOrientations’ can be proposed as a useful composite. It combines the singular reified Orient in the first term (and the need to critique it), with the plural in the second.<sup>8</sup>

Playing on the signifier in this way, might raise what some may consider the spectre of deconstruction. In invoking the work of Jacques Derrida at this point (and acknowledging that it remains controversial to many) , I am not proposing it as a totalizing methodological grid, but as a case study which is helpful to map how disOrientations can work. Also it will make clearer some connections between disOrientations and the postmodern, that complex and diffuse tendency in modern critical theory.

More specifically, the point is that the correction of some errors in the understanding of deconstruction by its critics can help in developing a discourse which is both critical of the construction of the Orient (disorientating the Orient) and of analysing texts which offer decentered perspectives on East and West (disoriented orients).

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<sup>7</sup> In a letter to her mother dated 23 January 1903, Sooni Tata writes: ‘Hier matin donc j’ai pendant une demie heure étudié le Goujerati (c’est dur).’ Tata Central Archives reference: FP NO 96 SL 25 PG 15).

<sup>8</sup> An alternative composite term could be ‘disorient(at)ing’ as is it captures the graphic vacillation between two spellings of the verb in English ‘disorient’ and ‘disorientate’. The *Oxford English Dictionary* lists the first usage of the verbs as 1655 and 1704 respectively. Both have the sense of ‘turn[ing] from an eastward position [and] caus[ing] to lose one’s bearings’. The figurative meaning of the second verb including ‘disconcerting’ overlaps with the range of the first verb which additionally carries the sense of ‘embarrass’. It is a justification of the critical force of that term that, in English, these negative forms with the prefix ‘dis’ predate ‘orient’ and ‘orientate’ the first usages of which are recorded as being in 1727 and 1849 respectively.

As acknowledged above, deconstruction continues to be a highly controversial critique of meaning in language. For those who reject Derrida, deconstruction is supposedly the destruction of meaning. They see destruction, not in the Heideggerian sense of disassembling-to-see-how-it-works *Destruktion*, but as a breaking to bits.<sup>9</sup> In the same way that ‘disorientation’ is a process which preserves direction and situation, deconstruction, as presented in Derrida’s texts, has a structure as is not in any sense directionless or random ‘free play’. For example in *Limited Inc*, a text partly published in English, Derrida writes: ‘I do not believe I have ever spoken of ‘indeterminacy’, whether in regard to ‘meaning’ or anything else’ (p. 148). Derrida rejects an association between deconstruction and ‘indeterminacy’, but embraces undecidability. This undecidability is a ‘determinate oscillation between possibilities [...] these possibilities are themselves highly determined in strictly defined situations’ (p. 148).

It seems that deconstruction as a method shows the oscillation of undecidability in meaning. This oscillation between determinate possibilities is one answer to how disOrientations can work, demonstrating plurality and a defined trajectory. So, if applied here, this would yield a move from the singular to the plural and back again, a move from the binary to the multipolar and back again and also a shift from the linear to the tangential and back again, and back again.

When we interrogate further the potential usefulness of disOrientations, there a potential obstacle is reached when we see that, in semantic terms, it appears to run counter to common sense. This is because, in common parlance, disorientation is generally associated with the total absence of direction and is used when people are lost, either in topography or in a forest of concepts. So, in order to reaffirm the value of disOrientations, it is necessary to show how this handicap can be turned into an advantage.

One of the most powerful and, at the same time most ubiquitous technological instruments of our age allows humans to avoid this situation of physical disorientation. The technology combines global positioning systems (GPS) delivered by satellites which, in have a totalizing view of the earth from space. This part of the technology is initiated

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<sup>9</sup> ‘Die Destruktion [...] hat positive Absicht; ihre negative Funktion bleibt unausdrücklich und indirekt.’ *Sein und Zeit*, p. 23.

and controlled by the military apparatus of states, and associations of states. The second part of the technology is a practical application of GPS by consumer electronics. These are of course satellite navigation systems ('satnavs'). These devices permit individuals who do not know where they are going in terms of geography to preserve a sense of orientation and direction. It is somewhat of a paradox that these systems, when they function, allow individuals to have a greater range and allow them not to be disorientated even when they traverse territory which is not familiar to them. When one of these devices is guiding the individual the boundaries between being oriented and disoriented are blurred. Despite this experience, a practical purpose can be achieved and people can arrive at their destinations.

When we examine disOrientations further in the light of both an accurate understanding of the practice of deconstruction and an understanding of the paradox of the satnav, we can say, therefore, that we are valuing disorientation not as an absolute state of directionlessness, but as a partial process, with a critical (and practical) edge. DisOrientations can therefore provide a good way of engaging with the ongoing debates regarding the overall purpose of Comparative Literature. These debates also seek to give comparison an enhanced critical function.<sup>10</sup> When practising disOrientations, we are moving through exciting, unfamiliar terrain, but our global positioning system and our moral compasses are still functioning, we hope.

In conceptual and historical terms, one must know where one has come from and when one came that way. Thus, in the positive form of disOrientations, direction, vectors and trajectories are valid and valued. Disorientation can thus be positive, but only if both a consciousness of history and of the individual's place within it is maintained. This joint awareness is a precondition of the effectiveness of this critical practice.

#### Non-British European women in Indian elites

In order to apply disOrientations and to develop a suitable method by which to analyse the limits of this composite term, let us now consider another individual case study. As in the case of Suzanne Brière / Sooni Tata, we are dealing with how a non-British European

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<sup>10</sup> 'The practice of translation in this context [the need to disrupt the deep structural laws by which languages are named after nation and peoples] becomes crucial [...] to the invention of a new comparative literature that finds its name in a zone of in-translation' Emily Apter, 'Theorizing Francophonie', p. 311.

woman makes sense of herself in an Indian elite. The domain of spirituality and religion is crucial for cultural contact between India and the West and, though her legacy with Calcutta's slum dwellers has been challenged in the last decade, Mother Teresa remains one of those 'spiritual giants from abroad who [...] gave their lives to India'.<sup>11</sup> The focus here is on Mother Teresa before she became Mother Teresa when she was Gonxha Bojaxhiu [pronounced 'Gon-zhay Bo-ya-joo'], an Albanian-speaking Catholic nun born in Skopje in what is now Macedonia in 1910.

Gonxha Bojaxhiu is an 'Indian *videshni*', *videshni* being the Hindi word for foreign woman.<sup>12</sup> It is an Indo-centric word which divides the world between all that is Indian and all that is not. Such a word has been included, not because its reductive perspective is welcome. That perspective is no different from the worst orientalizing gaze which instrumentalized non-Western peoples. It has been included because it is a reminder of an attitude which decenters the West and thus performs a critical function that is important in disOrientations. Using a term such as *videshni* is thus part of a practice of de-centered writing which is a feature of this collection, which although is published in the West, in European languages, focuses on cultural contact between the West and the East. Indian *videshni* are not just non-Indian in an absolute manner because these women are Indian too and they are being presented here as individuals with a doubled identity.

In the whole of the twentieth century, that is to say fifty years either side of Indian independence in 1947, the ambivalent identity of white, but non-British women in Indian elites enhanced their effectiveness and allowed them to play a role at a national level in the life of India. This is because their non-British origins allowed them to penetrate Indian elites, moving between the fronts that were drawn between the British and the Indians.

In terms of its general rhetorical structure the study of Indian *videshni* thus occupies a supplementary position correcting the mainstream view and focusing on

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<sup>11</sup> The final words of the 'Conclusion and Epilogue' of Robert Eric Frykenberg's *Christianity in India: From Beginnings to the Present*, p. 484. Aroup Chatterjee's perspective is altogether more critical in *Mother Teresa: The Final Verdict*.

<sup>12</sup> Two other examples of Indian *videshni* are: Mirra Alfassa, a Paris-born woman of Turko-Egyptian Sephardic Jewish origins, who led the Sri Aurobindo Ashram and also founded the experimental city of Auroville near Pondicherry. Then there is Italian-born Edvige Antonia Maino, who married into the Nehru-Gandhi dynasty in 1968 and who, as Sonia Gandhi, has been leader of the Congress Party since 1999.

exceptions to frontal thinking which remains trapped in positions which are binary opposites. Indian *videshni* link binary opposites, all the while recognizing the fragility of that endeavour. Thus, when paired with the word 'Indian', the term *videshni* forms an oxymoron, a contradiction in terms. It is impossible to reconcile both in a single stable entity. The women mentioned above all have doubled identities. They are both 'Indian' and *videshni*, whether embracing the tension for themselves or seeing the contrasting views about them from others. Their points of contact with India is also significant because it foregrounds the stratification that was always present within societies across India during colonial rule. The women whose influence I study in the colonial period (Gonxha Bojaxhiu and Suzanne Brière both entered India via elites such as the Roman Catholic Church, the Tatas one of the country's most prominent industrialist families. These women were all high-status individuals and their cultural contact with Indian societies was one of cultural interpenetration and change rather than superficial contact. This is confirmed by the way that they did not enter India on a one-way ticket, but continued to be go-betweens moving back and forth from the West to India.<sup>13</sup> In Derridean terms their movements are undecidable.

In focusing on how Suzanne Brière and Bojaxhiu see themselves and how they are seen by others, this essay will use private correspondence and images which were not intended for publication, but, in common with the majority of language acts do have a public context. I am focusing on communication that was directed by the Indian *videshni* to their host groups within the Indian elite. As such I will not be concerned with them as fully public figures. In the case of Bojaxhiu, therefore, I am going to focus on the period between 1946 and 1948 when she was still a Loreto nun who had arrived in India in January 1929. Quite apart from the political upheaval in the region and the founding of the state of India (to which I will return later), this period is extremely important for Bojaxhiu, because it marks the beginning of her agitating to found and lead her own organization, the Missionaries of Charity. This would entail break with the Loreto order to which she had belonged as a full member since she professed her final vows in 1937.

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<sup>13</sup> Edward Le Joly, quotes a Missionaries of Charity sister in 1986 as saying that Mother Teresa is 'continually away' *Mother Teresa: The Glorious Years*, p. 59.

The first document to consider is a key letter, written to Ferdinand Périer, the Archbishop of Calcutta in January 1947, the first time that she takes her project beyond her spiritual director Father Céleste Van Exem (1908–1993), who, like Périer, was a Jesuit of Belgian origins. The justification for her appeal for support is the goal of converting Indians to Christianity: ‘I have been longing to be all for Jesus and to make other souls – especially Indian, come and love him fervently’.<sup>14</sup> What makes this letter different from standard missionary rhetoric in which the number of conversions is also a measure of success, is that this longing for souls is paired with a desire to change her own identity. This is clearly a radical step for a nun working in a missionary context. For a European-trained Roman Catholic working in 1947 on one of the peripheries of the ‘Christian world’, one might expect a clearer marking of difference between Europeans and Indians. As we will see in what follows, these divisions very much still exist, however, Bojaxhiu’s comments here mark a different approach. The longing for souls is linked to the longing to ‘identify myself with Indian girls completely’ (p. 47). So, here we have a double longing where the fishing for souls is linked to a professed change of identity. These two elements have been isolated for clarity; however, if we look at the level of the sentence, we can see that these two types of longing are connected with each other and merged in a way that is difficult to separate: ‘During the year very often I have been longing to be all for Jesus and to make other souls – especially Indian, come and love Him fervently – to identify myself with Indian girls completely, and so love Him as He has never been loved before.’ (p. 47). The quotation typifies the fragility of the situation of Indian *videshni*, but also of its interest.

It is very important to set this exchange in its context, at one level this is a simple Loreto nun making a radical request to the head of her diocese. Although the request was not granted immediately it is given significant extra weight because it is not couched in terms of a request by a subordinate to a superior, but in terms of Bojaxhiu’s relaying a calling which has come directly from God. Bojaxhiu is making the request less as a missionary, than as a mystic. The initial proving ground for the authenticity of this divine voice had been the exchanges over many months that Bojaxhiu had with her spiritual

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<sup>14</sup> All quotations from Bojaxhiu’s correspondence are sourced from Brian Kolodiejchuk (ed), *Come Be My Light: The Private Writings of the ‘Saint of Calcutta’ / Mother Teresa*. This work gives presents those letters written in Serbian in English translation only.

director Father Van Exem. It is only with his recommendation that she has been able to write to the Archbishop.

The voice gives Bojaxhiu great authority, but does not only limit itself to spiritual issues. This is because the development of a radical new engagement with India is part of the wider project of the Missionaries of Charity, the voice will also dictate the blueprint of what her Indianness will consist. Its first two elements evoked in the letter to Archbishop Périer are Marian poverty and humility, but these are transferred to an Indian context; they are literally spun out of Indian cloth. Bojaxhiu puts what the voice says in quotation marks “” You will dress in simple Indian clothes or rather like My Mother dressed – simple and poor. – Your present habit is My symbol – your sarie [sic] will become holy because it will be My symbol”” (pp. 48–49). This comment in which we see Indian clothes being tied into the humility of Mary, followed by a dynamic in which holiness is transferred from the nun’s habit to the sari, are both indications of how well Bojaxhiu planned the use of selected Indian elements in her project for a new order of free nuns.

Let us now leave aside both the mystical and the pragmatic content of this letter and analyse in greater depth how Bojaxhiu envisaged that she would ‘live the life of an Indian in India’ (p. 106). We have seen that this Indianness involved identification with Indian women, therefore what was proposed to the Church would not run counter to established gender roles. The imperative was to care, to meliorate the negative effects of the world as it was, rather than to change it. The second point is that Indianness for Bojaxhiu is a practice of life in the world for a spiritual goal.

There is therefore an element of the performative in Bojaxhiu’s Indianness, this is not necessarily to suggest that it is a deliberate pretence. Rather, we should ask if this is an adaptive practice of living in the here-and-now, rather than a monolithic mode of being. As such Bojaxhiu’s practice would run counter to ontology and overlap again with Heidegger’s *Destruktion*.<sup>15</sup> It would also have similarities with Derrida’s *différance* (something which he insists is not a concept, but which might also be better conceived of as a critical practice, which differs and delays): ‘La différence précède la métaphysique

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<sup>15</sup> ‘Diese Aufgabe verstehen wir als die am Leitfaden der Seinsfrage sich vollziehende Destruktion des überlieferten Bestandes der antiken Ontologie [...]’ (*Sein und Zeit*, p. 22).

mais aussi déborde la pensée de l'être, car c'est elle qui rend possible le sens de l'être (avec ses oppositions) et non l'inverse.' Jacques Derrida, *De la grammatologie*, p. 206. If being is subjected to Derridean *différance* it spills over ('déborde') the boundaries within which it is conventionally conceived. So what we have is 'being' expanded to include things which are not usually in it. Let us now see if Bojaxhiu's practice realises the radical aspects of this.

Bojaxhiu does use the verb 'to be' in relation to Indianness after January 1948 when she has been freed from her vows as a nun; however, as we will now see, her identity is doubled. This is illustrated by the following quotation that relates how, when she is looking for a base from which to begin her mission with the poor, she proposes that she stay as a servant – a *jhi* – in a nunnery at Gobra. Speculating on how others will see her, she writes: 'They will be surprised at the fair face, but tell them I am an Indian since last month' (p. 127). In the same manner as when we look at the postcard by Sooni Tata, we can discern Bojaxhiu taking pleasure in the confusion that she will sow in the convent. Here the undecidability will oscillate between her white skin and her Indian citizenship. Will the new servant be an Indian or a European, or an 'impossible' Indian *videshni*?

Much later in life when Bojaxhiu had become known internationally as Mother Teresa, the following statement was attributed to her: 'By blood, I am Albanian, by citizenship Indian, by faith a Catholic nun. As to my calling, I belong to the world'.<sup>16</sup> Both quotations sum up a constitutive plural in relation to being and national identity.

As far as the methodology of DisOrientations is concerned and the need to maintain its critical focus, we can see that Bojaxhiu here understands her Indianness in terms of citizenship. These material and historical aspects have been entirely neglected by all of those who have written about her life. They tend to stress the spiritual and religious dimension, which is evidently essential to understand the impact of the woman who came to be known as Mother Teresa, but it is clearly not the only way to interpret Bojaxhiu. The historical dimension is also crucial to the way in which the flux of her identities are contextualized. This is because Bojaxhiu herself is aware that the very nature

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<sup>16</sup> In common with many of the well-crafted quotations associated with Mother Teresa, is it not possible to find a reference for it.

of Indianness has changed in the period when she was trying to found her order. India became a sovereign nation on 15 August 1947 and she made a conscious decision to choose Indian citizenship in 1948. As we have seen, in the letters to Archbishop Périer, she stresses the religious justification of her proposed new vocation and does not directly mention even once this sense of seizing the opportunity that that history was offering the Church in India at this particular period in time. However, the fact that she took action herself to implicate herself into the creation of the Republic of India by becoming an Indian citizen within one year of the establishment of the state, demonstrates that she acted upon a historical awareness. Indeed, there is a clear sense in which her insistence on the authenticity (supposed or otherwise) of living ‘like an Indian with the Indians’ (p. 115) gave her project a compelling historical imperative. This is the crucial factor in the foundation of the Missionaries of Charity that has been neglected by other commentators.

While the effectiveness of Bojaxhiu’s discourse of Indianness is difficult to doubt in historical terms, it is important to recognize that it also demonstrates that oscillatory plurality which is a feature of the overlap between disOrientations and Derridean undecidability, the back-and-forth movement between ‘determined possibilities’. In Bojaxhiu’s case, the two possibilities are discourses which embrace and reject Indianness.

It would appear, therefore, that what Bojaxhiu has to say about her wish to ‘live like an Indian with the Indians’ (p. 115) is opposed to the distancing of much missionary rhetoric, a closer look at the same first letter in which Bojaxhiu outlines her project to the Archbishop, simultaneously affirms a resistance to the Indian way of life. She writes that ‘the thought of eating, sleeping – living like the Indians filled me with fear’ (p.49). This is a fundamental fear which is a common feature of missionary rhetoric.<sup>17</sup> This quotation suggests that the plurality displayed in Bojaxhiu’s projection of an Indian self-image does not equate with an overcoming of European orientaling perspectives. They are still present and indeed are used in the letter as a token of the

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<sup>17</sup> Two quotations from the two decades before this letter demonstrate that Bojaxhiu certainly used such rhetoric. A 1937-letter that Bojaxhiu wrote to her former confessor in Skopje, ends with the words: ‘I must go – India is a scorching as hell – but its souls are beautiful and precious because the Blood of Christ has bedewed them’ (p. 21). A very early poem that Bojaxhiu wrote in Serbian while on her way to Kolkata by sea in 1928, repeats orientalist climatic stereotypes which are a feature of the physiological experience of the European body in Asia. The poem refers to ‘steamy Bengal’ to ‘torrid India’ and to ‘[...] one last look / At Europe’s dear shores’ (pp. 15–16).

horror that Bojaxhiu is willing to surmount in order to achieve her goal of going out among the Indians to save Indian souls. Faced with this fear, she says, ‘I prayed long – I prayed so much – I asked our Mother Mary to ask Jesus to remove all this from me. The more I prayed – the clearer grew the voice in my heart [...]’ (p. 49). This, as we have seen, leaves the field clear for her to quote the voice of God once again who says: ‘give Me the souls of the poor little street children’ (p. 49). The voice is speaking in favour of her project again. The affirmation of the strength of this divine voice, does not detract from the fragility of her performance of Indian identity.

This counterdiscourse which is fearful of India, suggests that, while Bojaxhiu’s conception of India does have the plurality associated with disOrientations, it does not have the edge which is necessary to be a critical discourse (this is a key aspect of disOrientations). Such a discourse aims to provide a critique of the ideological basis of the imbalance of power and wealth in India at the time.

Some might think it unrealistic to level this charge against Bojaxhiu whose oft-stated goal was to offer consolation and care to Kolkata’s slum dwellers. Is it important that her desire to live like an Indian cannot be co-opted into a critique of Western reductive discourse on India, Asia and on the East in general? While it would be wrong to suggest that there is a reactionary element evident in the conception of her order from the start, it is justified to suggest that the proposed new order of nuns is intended to enhance the position of the Roman Catholic Church in India. The Church is a multinational organization which, by virtue of its resources, occupied an elite position in the 1940s.

This tendency to amass power where it already exists is evident when we consider how Bojaxhiu envisaged the situation for members of her future order who were born in India. We have seen how Bojaxhiu is willing to allow identification with Indianness for herself, indeed it appears to be a pre-requisite for the success of the order. However, this freedom to perform a plural identity is not accorded to Indians. They would be the largest group of workers in the organization that she would lead.

In a letter to the Archbishop on the feast of Corpus Christi 1947 (in May or June), Bojaxhiu responds to practical concerns point-by-point. In response to his enquiry as to ‘whether it is not possible to obtain this end by congregations already in existence?’, she

replies that the problem is that existing congregations are ‘European’ (p. 76). She continues:

When our Indian girls enter these orders – they are made to live their life – eat, sleep, dress liken them. In a word, as the people say – they become “Mems [Memsahibs – White, European women associated with British colonial power in India]” [...] as much as those Sisters try to adapt themselves to the country, they remain foreigners for the people [...] He [Our Lord] asks for Indian Nuns – dressed in Indian clothes – leading the Indian life. – Whoever desires to be a Missionary of Charity will have to become Indian, dress like them, live like them’ (p. 76)

In this extract Bojaxhiu demonstrates double standards. Indian women who would work for the proposed new religious order, must be stopped from becoming Europeanized at all cost. This is in contrast to Bojaxhiu herself who does not see herself as subject to the same processes because when she affirms that ‘the Lord wants me to identify myself with the Indian girls’, this identification does not trouble her fundamental Europeanness.

When contextualized in this way, we can see that, for all its plurality, Bojaxhiu’s performance of Indianness is paired with hard and pragmatic ontological fronts. These formed along the axes of the Orient and the Occident with upper case O’s. It is very important to understand that the presence of these fronts co-exists with the plural discourse and does not negate it entirely (as her adoption of Indian citizenship illustrates). The Missionaries of Charity were never intended to be a neo-colonial organization in a simplistic sense of the word with European leaders and Indian workers. From the start, and acknowledging that they would operate in post-colonial India, they were conceived as a multi-national organization ‘I would very much like a few [novices from the West] because it will be hard for them’ said Bojaxhiu in 1951 (p. 140).<sup>18</sup>

Furthermore, as someone who was Macedonian-born and Albanian-speaking, Bojaxhiu herself was not immune from this essentializing gaze. For instance, in the same letter in which he warmly recommended her project to the Vatican, ‘[s]he is very gifted,

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<sup>18</sup> On 3 December 1947, Bojaxhiu asked that Archbishop Périer should be told of the following prospective novices: ‘two Yugoslav girls in Rome. Then there are six Bengali girls – The Belgium girl [sic] in the South’ (p. 100).

has always been deeply humble and submissive’, the Archbishop also invoked Bojaxhiu’s non-Western European ancestry (as well as possibly also condemning her for traits he associates with women): ‘She is of Slavic origin and consequently I fear that she is sometimes a bit exaggerated, maybe excited. But that is only a personal impression and I would find it difficult to prove the reason of that impression’ (p. 117). Périer realizes that what he mentions is a personal prejudice and there are not grounds to justify it, but he mentions it all the same, although it is presented in parentheses.

These three forms of comments, Bojaxhiu’s evocation of the fear of India, her essentializing of her prospective Indian workers and the way that she herself is essentialized by Archbishop Périer, all suggest that the Orient, in its singular, capitalized, reductive form can reappear in the very midst of discourses which constantly reach out towards the other. In Bojaxhiu’s case the performance of Indianness is constructed via object relations. That is to say that it is far easier for her to grant a shift in identity to herself than to others. Thus, while acknowledging that different forms of plurality will be found in engagements with the other (plurality of voice and of genre, to name just two), it is important for the functioning of disOrientations as a critical discourse to recognize that the solid fronts between the Orient and the Occident can always return. This return can be a single occurrence or a Nietzschean eternal recurrence. The possibility of the Orient in this plurality is like the possibility of ice in water: it can form and reform whenever the temperature dictates it.

Sooni Tata’s postcard and Bojaxhiu’s letters both demonstrate a complex engagement with an Indian language and with Indian identity. Both engagements merit detailed study as language acts. However, as a critical practice, DisOrientations, goes further, contextualizing them fully and interrogating their limits. Its critical edge comes to the fore when it goes under the surface and analyses the preconditions on which such plurality is based. These can range from the reductive Orientalism seen above, to the precise structures of economic privilege which underlie the freedom of individuals such as Sooni Tata and Gonxha Bojaxhiu and the other Indian *videshni*.

As a final application of disOrientation to analyse plurality and the hard fronts of oppositional argument and their links with ontology, I would like to quote an exchange between R. Radhakrishnan and Edward Said. This is a piece of formalized academic

dialogue where Said had the right to reply to a series of appreciative articles written about his work following the publication of *Culture and Imperialism* in 1993. I shall only quote from it selectively and briefly from Radhakrishnan's sketch of a type of critic-thinker in the mould of Said without being called Said directly. This individual is a curious plural construction of ontology who is impersonal and yet *ad hominem* at the same time:

A critic who is open-ended in some ways but didactic in others; identitarian in certain contexts but differential-heterogeneous for other reasons; one whose knowledge production seeks legitimation and hegemonic closure on one level but deploys itself counterhegemonically on another. A thinker who travels through methodologies and is therefore non-exemplary. In short, a liminal and not a proper critic [...].<sup>19</sup>

In his reply, Said takes Radhakrishnan's comments personally and replies with reference to what he would call himself, while also invoking a pluralist conception of his academic discourse: 'I wouldn't necessarily want to call myself "interstitial," but only to suggest that one doesn't, couldn't have a complete vision'.<sup>20</sup>

This reply is vintage Said and typical of the way that *Orientalism* and *Culture and Imperialism* are both compelling but limited as only the first step in a critical practice of disOrientations. Said refers to his own being, but only in a negative way, not giving detail. If he is assuming that his activism tells us what he is, then he does not say it. Then in a coda he makes a postmodern gesture to the limits of the relevance of his hypothesis. To summarize, Radhakrishnan's appreciation foregrounds plurality via ontology, whereas Said's response foregrounds and conceals ontology, with a nod to plurality. The appreciation and the response are two variations of the same dance around ontology and discourse. DisOrientations have shown us the need to be aware of these as separate elements, but to critically evaluate their joint functioning via both pluralism and a critical singularity.

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<sup>19</sup> See 'Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism: A Symposium*', *Social Text*, 40 (Autumn, 1994), 15–20, p. 15.

<sup>20</sup> Edward Said: Response' in 'Edward Said's *Culture and Imperialism: A Symposium*', *Social Text*, 40 (Autumn, 1994), 20–24, p. 20.

This points to a paradox that lies at the heart of academic discourse, namely that as a shared activity, its openness is inimical towards the singular conclusions which must govern every individual manifestation of it.

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