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It Matters What You Call a Thing:
How Illustration During the Indian Mutiny
Shaped the Visual Culture of Victorian England

The poet Solmaz Shariff writes, “it matters what you call a thing.” This simple, yet profound phrase calls attention to the power of language. It makes clear the point that *all* language is a semiotic event—one where its system of signs (letters) are used to make meaning (words, phrases, ideas). Undoubtedly imbued within this system of signs is some kind of ideology—a reasoning for using the system for a certain meaning. So, what does it *mean* when Victorian British colonizers call the first uprising of Indian soldiers a “mutiny” instead of a “revolution”? What is the ideology behind this naming? One thinks to research the definition of a mutiny: *a forcible or passive resistance to lawful authority*. By this definition, The Indian Mutiny, as it is called in most history books, is understood as an insubordination. This moniker frames the paradigm of colonizer and colonized as just. It eliminates any agency the colonized people have to reclaim their identity by naming their revolt a “disobedience” (Gupta, 221). An ideology is formed—one in which colonizer (white) always has the right to rule over the colonized (brown). Another question arises: what happens when this system of signs (language) is accompanied by another separate system (image)? *Punch*, Victorian England’s most prolific satirical magazine at the time of the Indian Mutiny, asked this very question. *Punch*’s “large cut” illustrations were the first instance of the “political cartoon,” and were a profound achievement in the realm of print culture (Leary 35). Image and text had never been used together in such a way and with such a wide distribution. A new system of signs (a new semiotic event) was happening in Victorian England. This use of

illustration and text not only captured the feelings and beliefs of England's middle-class audience during the Indian Mutiny, it ushered in a new kind of visual culture to Victorian England—one where image, text, and ideology were inseparable and sought to serve the commodified racist agenda of the white middle-class.

The British began colonizing India, starting in the city of Bengal, in 1757. It didn't take long for the East India Trading Company, a major geopolitical trader, to become a powerful political force in India conquering new territories and Indian cities such as Bombay, Madras, Delhi and (Gupta, 218). Up until this time, Victorian audiences knew very little about India and its people. What they could envision of its landscapes came from small painted relics which made their way back to Britain through workers in the East India Company. But once the British began spreading out further and further across India, young Britons, who worked for the Company and its army, soon started sending back letters detailing their adventures in the fabled Indian landscapes. These letters were often accompanied by what would modern readers today would call postcards, but at the time, were actually small paintings on ivory or mica, produced by Indian artists under British guidance (219). These early postcards and relics which sent back to Britain, romanticized the Indian landscapes, buildings, and people to their middle-class families eager for tales of their son's adventures. In result, India became seen as an extension of Britain itself.

By the mid-nineteenth century though, tensions were high in India. The Indian Mutiny, also known as the Sepoy Rebellion, began on May 10, 1857 as a series of revolts in northern cities in India. Employed by the East India Trading Company, the sepoy

(Indian soldiers) revolted against their officers in an attempt to regain control of Bengal (Coohill 1). The most commonly documented reason for the revolt was that the sepoy became enraged after rumors that their weapons had been greased with cow and pig fat spread through sepoy camps. Having to bite the ammo cartridges off with their teeth, this was seen as highly offensive due to most of the soldiers being Hindu or Muslim (1). In addition to these rumors, there were key underlying transgressions taken against Indian natives by the British, such as lowered pay scales, a general decline in respect from British officers, and most importantly, the passing of the Doctrine of Lapse (2). This piece of legislation, enacted by the British governor of India, allowed the East India Company to take control over any Indian territory in which a native ruler died without an heir that the Company considered legitimate (2). When the city of Oudh, one of the richest and historically significant cities in India, was taken under British control the conquest was seen as a cultural insult. These two events were perceived as the “final straws” in the eyes of the sepoy.

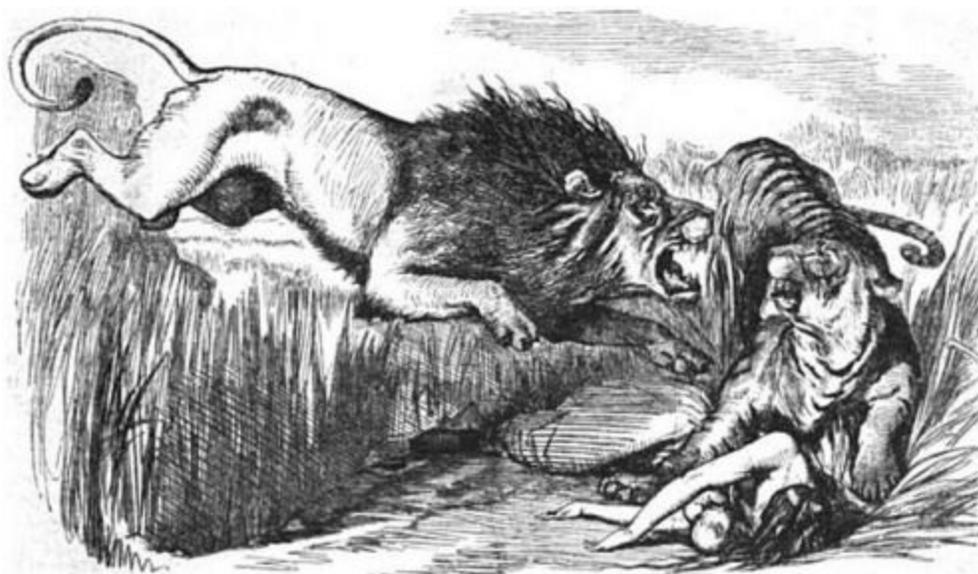
Back across the continent, in the years leading up to the Sepoy Rebellion, Victorian England had become increasingly obsessed with wood-engraved illustrations. Illustrated gift-books, like the *Moxon Tennyson*, were significant milestones in the commodification of Victorian visual culture. Published in 1857 (the same year as the Sepoy Rebellion), the *Moxon Tennyson* combined Alfred Tennyson’s book, *Poems*, with 54 illustrations from Pre-Raphaelite artists like John Everett Millais and Dante Gabriel Rossetti (Kooistra). This coupling of poem and wood-engraving, shifted the relationship between image and text in Victorian England drastically (Kooistra). This shift is in part a

result of the Pre-Raphaelite artists' simultaneous showings in galleries across England, most notably in the "Art Treasures of the United Kingdom Exhibition" in Manchester the same year as the *Moxon Tennyson's* publication. This elevation of wood-engravings to the status of "high art," commodified illustrated books like the *Moxon Tennyson* as works of art that the average Victorian middle-class family could own and display in their homes (Kooistra). These illustrated books became cultural centerpieces and, subsequently, a perfect example of how the combination of text, image, and ideology was becoming normalized in the everyday life of the Victorian middle-class.

Not surprisingly, simultaneous to the excitement surrounding illustrated gift-books, British visual culture was deeply enthralled in the representation of the Sepoy Rebellion. Newspapers like the *Illustrated London News* began bringing stories and illustrations of the battle scenes and Indian soldiers into Victorian homes daily (Kooistra). These illustrations, however, were not factually accurate representations of battles or landscapes. Nearly all the wood-engravings published by the *ILN* at the beginning of the Sepoy Rebellion were imagined scenes based on landscape photographs housed in London, sometimes from decades earlier (Gupta 223). It wasn't until three months after the rebellion started that the *ILN* was able to publish illustrations based on sketches from British observers actually on location in India (Kooistra) and it wasn't until nearly 8 months after the rebellion began, that in January 1858, an actual photographer from the newspaper was on location in India (223). These falsified illustrations were bought and digested as realism by Victorian readers. This image/text relationship contributed to a visual culture that was not concerned with

factual evidence, but rather one that's main concern was selling newspapers. The ideology behind this commodification of Indian landscapes in this image/text relationship only perpetuates the power dynamic between colonizer (white) and colonized (brown).

This preservation of race-based power structures through the paring image and text, was perhaps most notably represented in John Tenniel's illustration, "The British Lion's Vengeance on the Bengal Tiger," published in *Punch* on August 22, 1857. As one of Britain's "central cultural institutions" by the mid nineteenth century, the satirical magazine prided itself on being the voice of the Victorian middle-class (Leary, 1). It's invention of the "political cartoon", a term-coined by John Leech, one the founding editors, was a monumental moment in the history of visual culture, not only in Victorian England but worldwide. These "social cuts," as they were also referred to as, carried an enormous amount of influence when commenting on prominent social issues and events in England (35).



8.—The British Lion's Vengeance on the Bengal Tiger.
By Sir John Tenniel. 1857.

The above illustration by John Tenniel was published in *Punch* on August 22, 1857 and marked a pivotal moment in the shifting visual culture of Victorian England's representation of race relations during the Sepoy Rebellion. What is interesting about this illustration is how Tenniel and the "*Punch* brotherhood" (Leary) came up with this allegorized scene.

In late June of 1857, sepoy soldiers besieged the city of Kanpur and overthrew the British command. Nearly 400 British men, women, and children were killed in the attacks. A few weeks later, around 200 remaining prisoners were killed by sepoys--their bodies cut up and thrown in wells around the city. This event was known as the Kanpur Massacre and was a defining moment in Britain perception of the rebellion (English 169). Reports of the attacks were not published in Britain, however, until August 29, 1857—one week after John Tenniel's illustration was published (Matei 175). So what accounts for *Punch's* victimization of British women and children in Tenniel's illustration? What accounts for the fear of the "violent and disobedient", Indian natives if that fear is not rooted in facts? Once again, we see how the image/text/ideology relationship was not predicated on facts, but rather, served the commodified racist agenda of the white middle-class. In this light, Tenniel's illustration is nothing short of fear-mongering aimed at the Victorian audiences.

In the picture, a woman (British), whose clothes have been ripped off by a Bengal tiger, attempts to shield her baby from attack. From the top right corner of the image, a lion (British) jumps out from the bushes to save the woman from the tiger (Indian). The lion's body is fully stretched out, taking up 3/4 of the frame, with its mouth wide open

bearing all its teeth. The tiger, snarling, withdraws into a position of defense (a weakened state). The Lion, from a higher vantage point, (a position of power) clearly has the upper hand. In terms of political iconography, Tenniel's illustration is falls in place with the normalization of white superiority. At the core of Tenniel's illustration is a fearful white middle-class. What his illustration does is, "translate news into a metaphor for every fear associated with the mutiny, which shows how a political cartoon construct, as well as rely on, collective discourse" (Matei 176). This pairing of image and text succinctly allegorized the victimization of the British in times of rebellion, as well as the racist ideology fueling British colonialism. Already accustomed to seeing illustrations commodifying Indian narratives and landscapes (be they false or factual), Victorian audiences became increasingly afraid of the "mutiny" and its attack on British life (and property).

It would be easy to rail against John Tenniel as an individual—placing the sole blame of such a racially-charged illustration on his shoulders, but we cannot do that. Patrick Leary writes extensively on *Punch's* process to thwart other scholarly essays' "short-sightedness" and criticism of individual artists, detailing the collaborative process these social cuts were: "the Large Cut, was born of talk, an at times chaotic vocal collaboration in which suggestions wheeled through the cigar smoke in thick profusion" (37). What Leary himself fails to realize is that by showing how collaborative each print was, it only serves to illuminate the need for further cultural-critique of the magazine's ideology because of the inherent system of checks and balances. Not only can we see an emphasis on the commodification of the image+text relationship, we now see how

Victorian visual culture is inundated with a new kind of semiotic event that perpetuates an oppressive ideology.

This new kind of semiotic event—where image, text, and ideology are combined into easily digestible snippets of culture—was a significant event in the history of Victorian visual culture. From the onset of gift-books, the commodification of this new relationship was rampant in Victorian England. Middle-class families became the main audience for (and consumers of) these new kinds of works. In reality, these system of signs (language and image) being free of any ideology seems impossible. What is possible, however, is constructing a system of signs and subsequent meaning that is rooted in reality and truth not fear and racism. It is easy to see now, that news outlets like the *Illustrated London News*, with their imagined illustrations, only sought to paint India and its people as an extension of British life and imagination in order to sell copies of the paper. This commodification of culture is not only unjust, it is an inaccurate depiction of life in that culture. This new system of signs, built on the fear and imagination of the British middle-class, used the text, illustration and ideology to create a new kind of visual culture in Victorian England--one that perpetuates the hegemonic power structure of colonization.

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Annotated Bibliography

Coohill, Josph. "Indian Voices from the 1857 Rebellion." *History Today* 57.5 (2007): 48-54. Web. 14 Apr. 2017.

This article in *History Today* details the personal narratives of Sepoy soldiers in the Indian Mutiny of 1857. The author uses the memoirs of both British loyalists, such as Sita Ram, and mutineers like Pandurang Mahipat Belsare to illustrate the contrasting views of Indian natives. While the article doesn't propose a drastically alternate timeline of events contrary to accepted historical facts that lead up to the mutiny, it does go further in depth about why the Doctrine of Lapse and the loss of the city of Oudh coupled with events were so pivotal to sparking the battle for independence.

Gupta, Narayani. "Pictorializing the "Mutiny" of 1857." *Traces of India: Photography, Architecture, and the Politics of Representation, 1850-1900*. By Maria Antonella. Pelizzari and Julia Ballerini. New Haven, CT: Yale UP, 2003. 216-39. Print.

This chapter details the visual history of the "Mutiny" of 1857 in India. Gupta explains the commodification of Indian visuality (landscapes, monuments, battle sites) and how it developed over the later half of the 19th century. This commodification in part stems from the imagination and fantasy of the British middle-class receiving letters and illustrations from family members living in India and also miniature paintings by Indian artists pre-"Mutiny" that were sold in Britain. But the portrayal of India visual

"Indian Mutiny." Encyclopædia Britannica. 2014. Research Starters. Web. 13 Apr. 2017.

Encyclopædia Britannica's entry on the Indian Mutiny details key events that transpired before, during, and after the mutiny of 1857. The article focuses on the "increasing pace of Westernization" in India and how it was the main catalyst into the rebellions. In comparison with the article in *History Today*, which details the Indian perspective, Britannica's entry seems white-washed; focusing primarily on the British experience of the rebellion and the perceived advantages afforded the Indian people after the peace treaty, the article falls in line with the standard: history from the winner's side.

Kooistra, Lorraine Janzen. "The Moxon Tennyson as Textual Event: 1857, Wood Engraving, and Visual Culture." *BRANCH: Britain, Representation and Nineteenth-Century History*. Ed. Dino Franco Felluga. Extension of *Romanticism and Victorianism on the Net*. Web. 17 April 2017.

In Kooistra's article, she first discusses how wood engravings become a point of high art in Victorian culture, being featured in the British Library Reading Room and the Art

Treasures of the United Kingdom Exhibition. This gave middle-class consumer's a sense of pride when purchasing books like the Moxon Tennyson. But this also changed the way people viewed the wood engravings of the newspaper, specifically the work being produced in the *Illustrated London News* and *Punch*. She goes on to explain how Tenniel's engraving played a significant role in shaping the Victorian visual culture as it pertained to race and gender.

Leary, Patrick. "Introduction." "Cartoons and Conversations: The Large Cut." *The Punch Brotherhood: Table Talk and Print Culture in Mid-Victorian London*. London: British Library, 2010. 1-10, 35-56. Print.

The Punch Brotherhood works to show how *Punch* was a "central cultural institution" of mid to late 19th century. Leary describes how *Punch's* production of Large Cuts (also called 'social cuts') in this manor was the first instance of the political cartoon, as the term was coined by John Leech. The magazine, according to Leary, strove to reflect the attitudes, conversation, and culture of it's Victorian middle-class readers. Leary writes at length to thwart other scholarly essay's "short-sightedness" and criticism of *Punch*, detailing the collaborative process these social cuts and issues of *Punch* were. What Leary himself fails to realize is that by showing how collaborative each print was it only serves to illuminate the need for cultural-critique of the magazine's ideology further because of the inherent system of checks and balances (i.e. by showing us the glue, he also showed us the cracks).

Matei, Anna. "Women and the Indian Mutiny: Framing the Mutiny in a *Punch* Cartoon and a Lucknow Diary." *Vides III* (2015). Web. 14 April 2017.

Matei's article examines the representation of women in Victorian culture through both literature and illustration. Looking at Tenniel's "The British Lion's Vengeance on the Bengal Tiger," published August 1857, Matei investigates the contemporary context through which the picture must be "read" in both terms of women's representation and national interest in the media.

Nicora, Flaminia. "An Icon of "British Character": The Indian Mutiny and the Literary Imagination." *Textus* 20 (2007): 355-70. Web. 14 Apr. 2017.

This article talks about how British identity in "mutiny novels" was formed in the years after 1857 and the Indian "Mutiny." Nicora describes the ideological notions of "Englishness" as it pertains colonial expansion and cultural hegemony. The article goes on to describe the relationship between the landscapes of India and revisionist history of tourism that perpetuated the British as superior. This analysis is similar to the work Gupta is doing in her work on the visual culture of the Indian "Mutiny."