

The background of the entire page is a low-angle shot of a tree's branches, silhouetted against a pale, overcast sky. The branches are dark and intricate, creating a complex web of lines. Some leaves are visible, particularly on the right side of the frame.

Loss Angles

about dead projects

Courtney Stephens



Utility Box
Kolkata, 2011

Well-meaning people will tell you not to give up on your weird, overextended project. But sometimes, you really should. It's a fine line between dedication and wasted time, but often it's only by giving up on one set of attachments that the way forward is revealed.

San Francisco Cinematheque invited me to write about a project I worked on for ten years that ended up becoming Terra Femme, and the many failed films along the way.

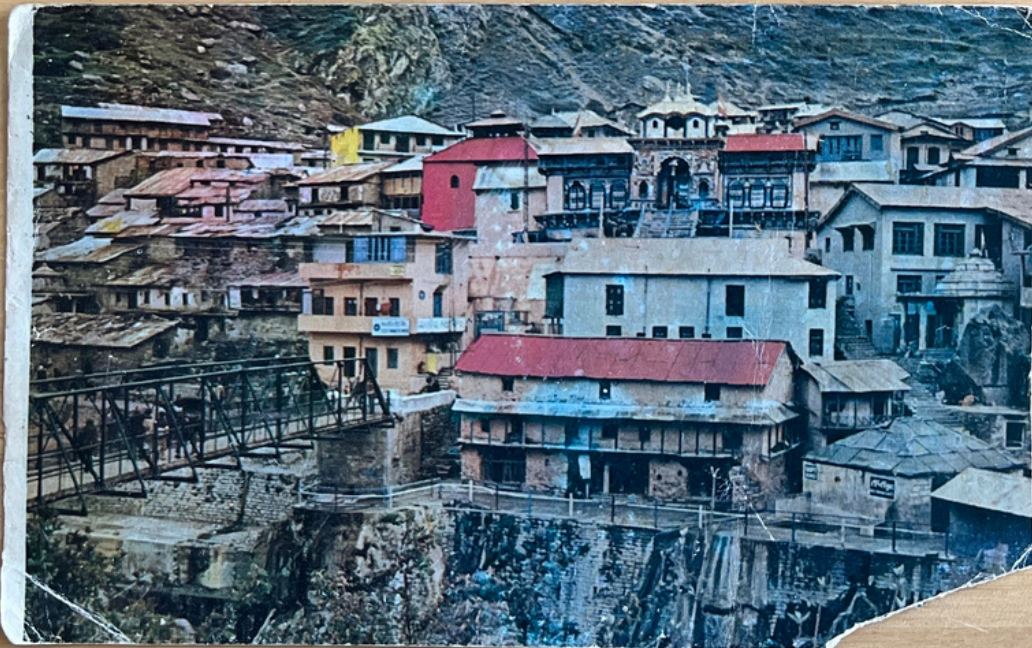




Construction
Mumbai, 2011



In 2011, I received a Fulbright to India to research the history of women's travel writing, and to make some kind of film on the subject. I was particularly interested in late 18th and early 19th century writing. I wanted to explore the overlap between travel writing and Romantic-era poetry, and their shared, fraught ideas around travel as time travel. I was interested in pretty much any written document generated by women of the time, from letters and diaries to recipes and household accounts.



The early mobility of Western women was almost universally tied to imperial interests, and entire genres of writing arose from this. British women traveled to foreign places as the wives of traders and civil servants, and their perspective on those places, politics, and their own situations were interesting and varied.



ART



Traffic
Kolkata, 2011

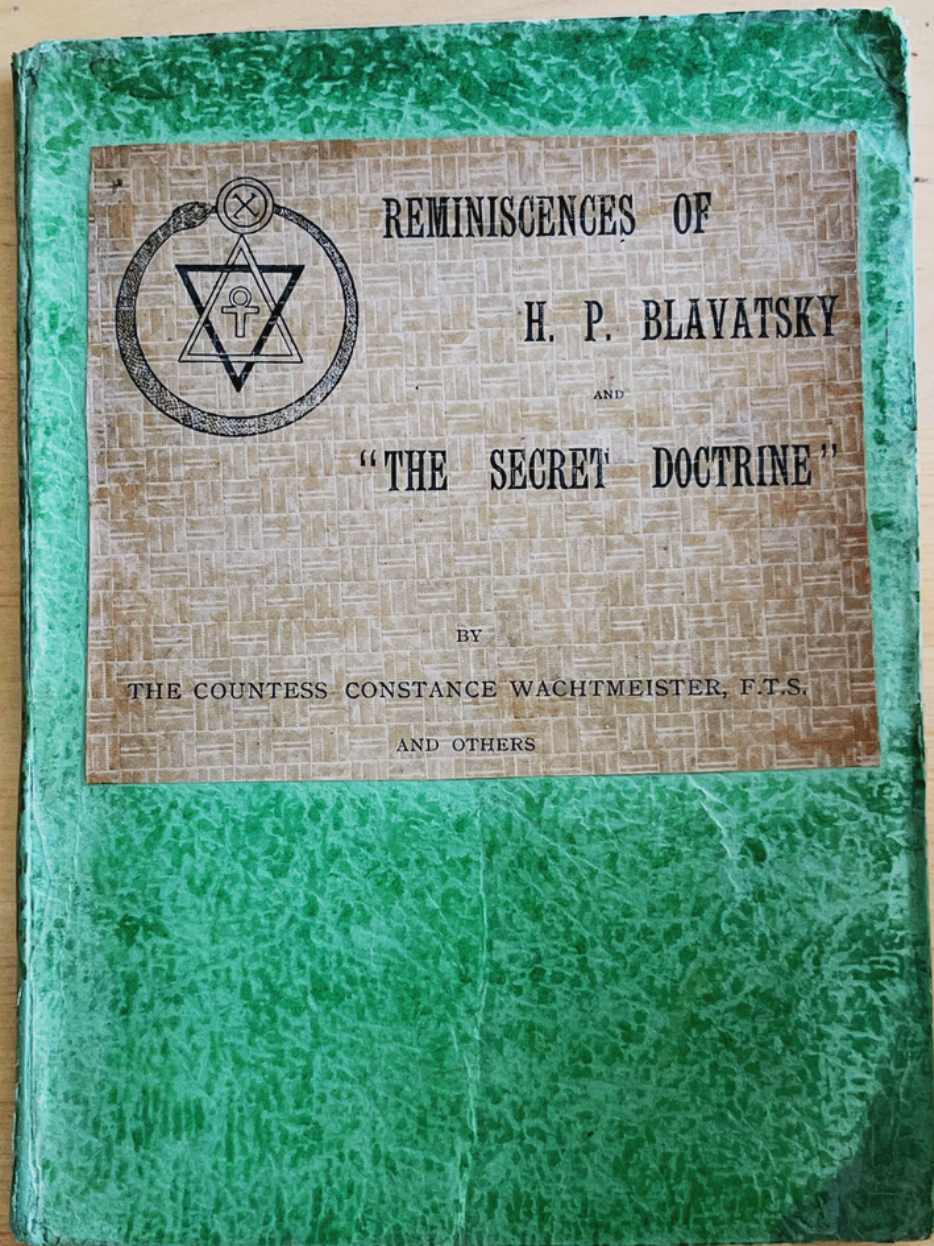


I rented a room in Kolkata on the ground floor of an old house, which was built up with balconied floors around an atrium and occupied by an extended family with whom I became close. My mornings were spent over long breakfasts and adda, the Bengali word for directionless chat. I adopted a kitten.

In the 19th century, Kolkata (then Calcutta) was a global center for trade and exchange, and this is reflected in the city's old cemeteries: British, Jewish, Chinese, Greek, Armenian, "Scottish and Dissenters." I thought maybe the cemeteries, their animals, and grave inscriptions would be the main visual component of the film.



Franny and Rahul
Kolkata, 2011

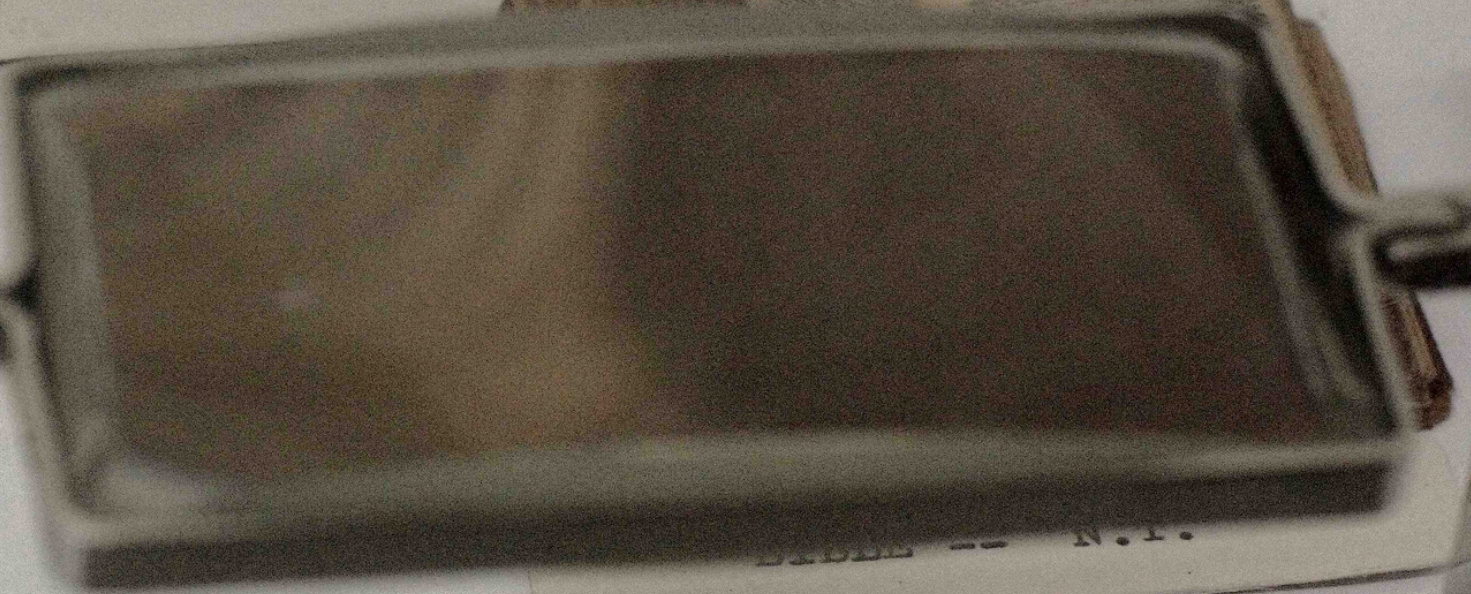


On a trip to Chennai in early 2012, I visited the Theosophical Society headquarters, a sprawling compound of overgrown temples and monuments to the world's religions, as well as a museum of religious esoterica. I remember someone telling me that at the turn of the century, joining the theosophical society just meant you were an interesting person. People like Frank Baum, the author of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*, was a member, as was his suffragette mother-in-law, Matilda Gage.

The origin of the Theosophical Society in 19th century India was connected to female travelers like Madame Blavatsky. At that time, foreign women with an interest in Eastern thought and religion had begun traveling to India to become disciples, or to start their own spiritual societies.

Following Image:
Theosophical Society
Headquarters Museum
Chennai, 2012

MINIATURE BIBLE



I became interested in Annie Besant, who converted to Theosophy in the 1880s after meeting Madame Blavatsky. Besant, a writer and political activist from London, moved to Chennai (then Madras) and began writing books about religion and spirituality. Over time she became increasingly politicized against British rule in India and joined the Indian National Congress, eventually becoming the organization's president. She helped launch the Home Rule League and was arrested periodically by British authorities.

My interest started to shift from the earlier period of merchant travel and Orientalist writing to this later period of exchange and political foment around the turn of the 20th century, and to the exchange between female activists in England and abroad.



Theosophical Society
Chennai, 2012

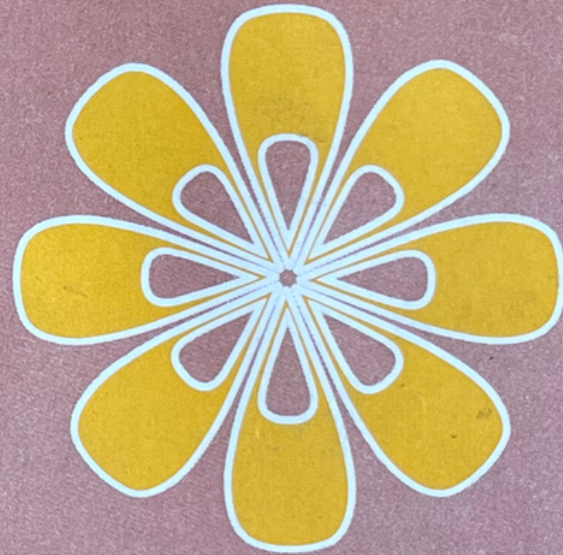
ESOTERIC CHRISTIANITY

ANNIE BESANT



A Quest Book
THEOSOPHICAL CLASSICS SERIES

A
STUDY IN
KARMA



Annie Besant



Bara Bazaar
Kolkata, 2012



Stairwell
North Kolkata, 2012



House of Sister Nivedita
North Kolkata, 2012

I learned about an Irish-born woman named Margaret Noble, who was a follower of Swami Vivekananda. She came to India at age 30 and was given the name Sister Nivedita, wrote prolifically about Hindu religion and women's education, started schools for child widows, and fought ardently against child marriage. She risked her life to help treat people when Plague broke out in 1906 and, like Besant, she was active in anti-British rule efforts. Her house in North Kolkata became a meeting place for dissident groups. I was interested in what I perceived as her relative anonymity, as I had never heard of her.

LETTERS OF SISTER NIVEDITA

EDITED WITH INTRODUCTION BY
SANKARI PRASAD BASU



LETTERS OF SISTER NIVEDITA

EDITED WITH INTRODUCTION BY
SANKARI PRASAD BASU



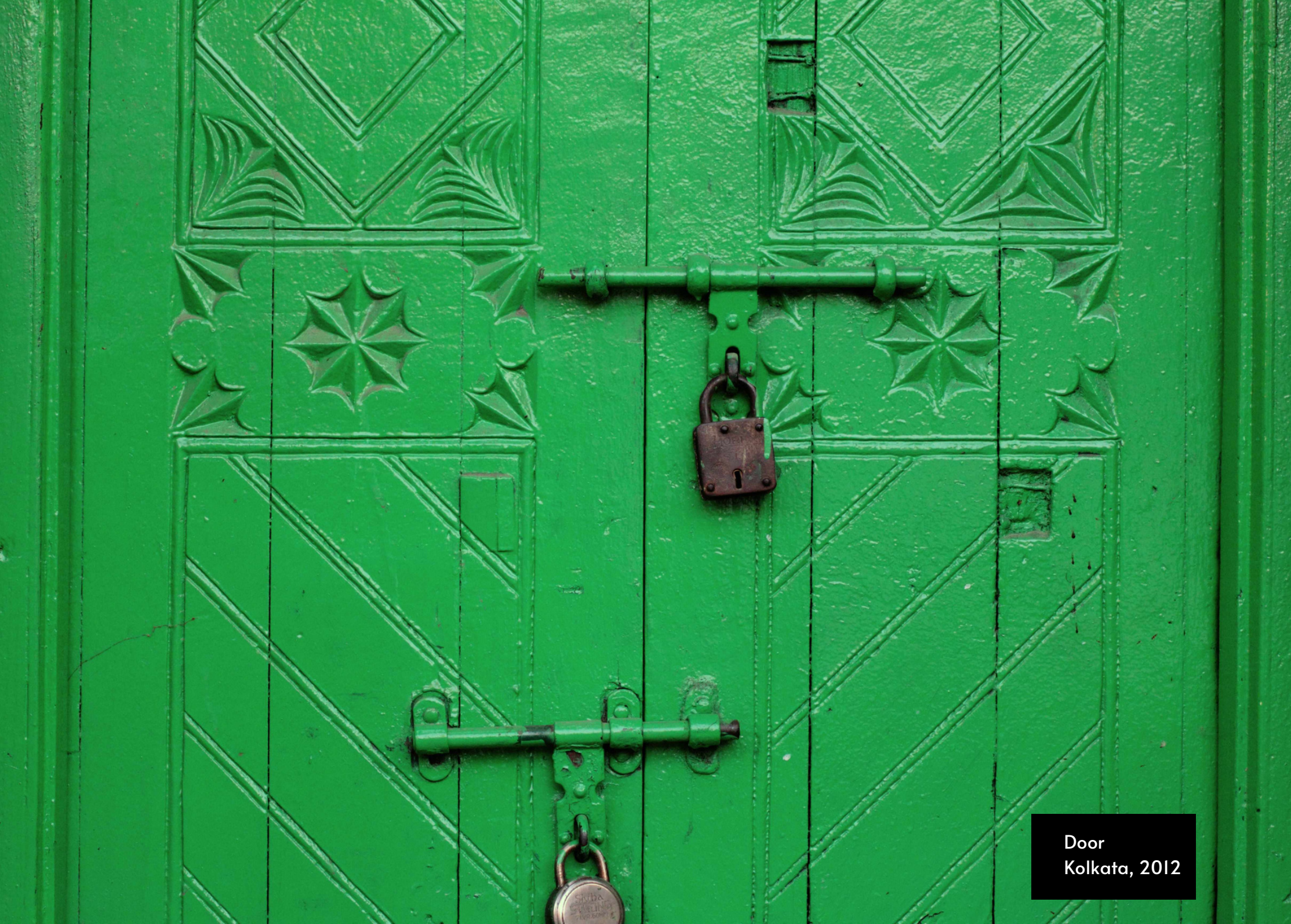
COURTESY



Ambassador taxi with
Kali image
Kolkata, 2012

June 5, 2012: A sweet memory from this time period is getting up before dawn to watch the rare Venus transit across the sun (next transit happens in 2117). We gathered on the rooftop of Kolkata's science museum and when the clouds cleared and we could see the little dot on the face of the sun it was thrilling.





Door
Kolkata, 2012

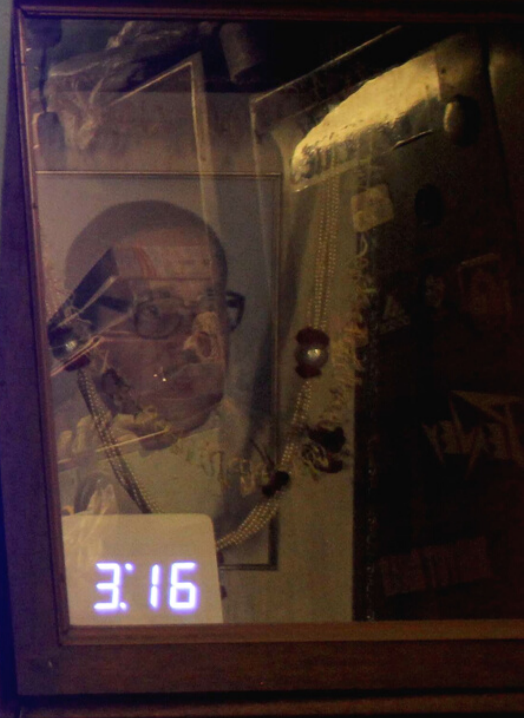


Image of Ramakrishna
Kolkata, 2012

I knew a little about Swami Vivekananda (left) through the writings of Christopher Isherwood. Vivekananda spoke at the 1893 Parliament of Religions conference (along with Besant) and made a big splash in the US, subsequently founding the Vedanta Society of Southern California. He is responsible for spreading the gospel of his guru Ramakrishna, a mischievous holy man of the mid-19th century, who said:

"God can be realized through all paths. All religions are true. The important thing is to reach the roof. You can reach it by stone stairs or by wooden stairs or by bamboo steps or by a rope. You can also climb up by a bamboo pole."

A network of thinkers and writers, including Vivekananda, linked Kolkata to Southern California in the early 20th century, figures like Isherwood and Aldous Huxley, who would later influence the psychedelic movement. The way Indian philosophy entered the American counterculture also seemed a worthy film subject, for someone.





Movie extras
Alipore, 2012

Then a truly bizarre coincidence occurred. A friend told me her uncle was producing a Tollywood (Bengali film industry) musical about the life of Vivekananda, and asked if I wanted to visit the set. The shoot was in an old mansion in Alipore. I was introduced to the kind-eyed director, Tutu Sinha, and told him about my project and research. He suggested I might play Sister Nivedita in his film—they hadn't cast her part yet—and I said: sure!

CESC
LIMITED

KOLKATA
the city of
Nivedita

Keep it Clean

RP. Sanjiv Goenka
Group

The Kolkata
Municipal Corporation

Nivedita anti-litter
campaign
Kolkata, 2012



নিবেদিতা
কবি স্মরণার্থে
এক
শ্রী প্রকৃতি

Nivedita memorial statue
Kolkata, 2012

Once I tuned into it, I started to realize how ubiquitous Nivedita's image was in the city, particularly around North Kolkata where she had lived. I met little girls who were named for her.

Tutu, who was very generous, suggested I follow the coincidence and make a film focused on Nivedita, using the props and costumes from his film. I, like him, am a believer in signs, and so I did. I documented the making of his film, the production of which took us all over Eastern India and along the Bay of Bengal, while also filming little scenes from the life of Nivedita. I persuaded Sandra, another Fulbrighter, to wear my costumes from the main film and had her sit pensively on doorsteps and balconies, hiding the contemporary city all around us. I even hired priests to perform funerary services on Sandra. Both of us extended our visas.

I figured I would tie all these scenes and layers of media and history together through Nivedita's writing once I began editing.





Sandra as Nivedita
Kolkata, 2012



Dakineshwar
Kolkata, 2012



At some point, however, I started to wonder what story I would be telling with my low-budget period piece, and why. Nivedita's story was so specific it was hard to link her to my original research, and I suspected that what I was calling a research project had simply become a way of mythologizing my own experience, which is something I resent in other films. I started to wonder what I was doing.

One day when we weren't shooting, Tutu and I had lunch at the restaurant Peter Cat. He asked me what medium had brought me to filmmaking. He had previously worked as a photographer, and felt that he had come to film through his love of photography. I said I thought what led me to film was an interest in reading and language. He politely disagreed and said he thought my medium was "searching,"



Old House
Darjeeling, 2012



After the film wrapped, I started getting work as a voiceover actress for educational and how-to videos, which allowed me to extend my visa yet again. I ran around filming everything I thought I might need to make any number of films.

During my last months, my cousin came to visit and we took a train trip from Kolkata up to Darjeeling in the low Himalayas. Sister Nivedita had died there at age 43, and I heard there might be a physical memorial. After a lot of searching in mountain fog, we found Roy Villa, the building where she died, now occupied by posted soldiers, many of whom were outside playing ping pong. A plaque said, "Sister Nivedita breathed her last in this house." We also found her grave in a tiny cemetery down the side of a mountain.

While hanging around the central square of Darjeeling, I ran into the head of the Fulbright program who was touring with his family. He looked confused and said "Courtney? What are you still doing here?"

HERE REPOSE THE REMAINS OF
SISTER NIVEDITA

(MARGARET ELIZABETH NOBLE)

WHOSE WORK FOR INDIANS,
WOMEN ESPECIALLY, MADE HER JUST THE
WOMAN WANTED AT THAT TIME.

OCTOBER 13, 1911



LOSS ANGLES

Bouncer

In 2013 my stepdad got sick. I gave my cat to the Irish nun Sister Cyril, came back to the US and moved in for awhile with my mom. With the occasional help of thoughtful editors, a film began to take "shape" into a sprawl of footage, quotation, and digression; a collection of nearly every thought I'd ever had. I would later hear Rick Prelinger say, regarding film editing, that "deletion is growth" but at that time, I only knew how to add. To with my own mountain of footage, I began stitching in archival footage shot in India in the early 20th century.

In one university archive I came across a beautiful reel, the author of which was listed only under her second husband's name, Mrs. John Dixon—an alumni of the school. It was noted that this woman had traveled the world between her two marriages. Wild, I thought, that we could experience what she experienced, but that she had somehow failed to exist historically.



↑ ZONE-BMA

EDUCATION



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The project continued to expand and by 2017 I felt I might have to give up. Time had passed, my stepdad had died, and it seemed like I should move on with life. That year, I was invited to participate in an event around film spectatorship, and I thought it would be interesting to screen the films of Mrs. Dixon and to talk about other amateur travelogues—films that inscribe private sensibility while intersecting with large historical tides. These residues of women's lives could have other equal forms it seemed, in a quilt, or even a meal.

This thought helped me find a different point of view: one less concerned with historical participation than in absence and presence itself. Rather than seeing travel through the way one interprets the world, I started to think about the unfamiliar world as a medium for getting to know the private self. Over the next few years, this helped me complete my project, and freed me a little from the bite of failure and wasted time.



In memory:

Tutu Sinha, film director, who always cheered me on in my project and never forgot my birthday up until he passed away from COVID-19.

Aveek Sen, writer and critic, with whom I shared delightful evenings in Kolkata, gossiping and talking about books, films, and life. He participated in the virtual panel that followed an online iteration of Terra Femme in 2020, before also passing from COVID-19.

Daniel Makover, my stepdad, who believed in me with fierce loyalty even when he didn't have much reason to.

Courtney Stephens, 2023