

CHAPTER FOUR
ETHNOSCAPE: THE BODY BETWEEN SYMBOLIC GEOGRAPHY
AND COLONIAL ALLEGORY

The present chapter examines how the body emerges as a decisive spatial trope in colonial travel and expedition literature, especially in ethnographic texts. It seeks to explore how the body of the native inhabitant in ethnocentric landscapes—either constructed or realized—is often represented in ways that defy human description and yet help develop a symbolic geography of otherness. In other words, inasmuch as landscape and territory symbolize colonial allegory and imperial assets, the attribution of ethnoscape to particular corporeal type ensures that the body emerges as a virtual topography. It is argued that this space occupied by the ethnic body is neither represented fully by what we call landscape nor by what is called territory. Instead, spaces seen as the homelands of particular tribes are best viewed as ethno-corporeal spaces. To present the inhabitant of the northeast as a symbolic other, the travel writer uses imagined specificities of the native body—as a landscape is constructed as part of imagined geographies—by way of anthropological or ethnographic troping. At the same time, the entire rhetoric of the corporeal otherness available in the discourse is part of a larger spatial politics.

Once the corporeality of a tribe—the body of a particular ethnic group either represented through an individual body or seen as a collective body of people—is seen as belonging to a specific landscape, neither the tribe nor the landscape can exist—either in the ethnographic imagination or in colonial records—as exclusive and independent of each other. Each becomes a combinatorial entity. This is part of colonial spatial politics, imprisoning the body alternately in colonial and corporeal space. This imprisonment of the body is informed by a symbolic geography, its attributes validated by colonial anthropology and sustained by the ethnographer's imagination. To the extent that ethnic groups are separated from one another in terms of their physical characteristics—and particular ethnic enclosures identified as the homelands of particular ethnic groups—ethnoscape is the beginning of a territorializing exercise, hence the suggestion of a colonial allegory.

Ethnography or 'body-marking' in 'body-spaces' (Sharp13), is as important to colonialism as constructing landscape and territory. In a way, the very idea of certain kind of landscape—that a forest patch is sublime or ugly or that a riverbed is lonely or crowded—is already implicated in this kind of geography making or imposition of a symbolic meaning onto nature. In simpler terms, the exercise involves the imposition of culture on nature.

The chapter is premised on the idea that the construction of space in colonial discourse is not only confined to military or economic dimensions but also to ethno-corporeal space making. While the predominant aesthetic of frontier space is essentially determined by military and economic determinants, there is an equally powerful construction of symbolic geographies centered on the metaphorization of the body. As the chapter shows, colonial ethnography is one of the major instruments of transforming nature into culture. It examines the framing of such body-spaces or ethnospaces—symbolic and yet instrumental in spatial politics—in the northeast frontier region with reference to Edward Tuite Delton's *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal* (1872), and L A Waddell's *The Tribes of the Brahmaputra Valley* (1901).

Given the relationship between colonialism and colonial travel writing, it would be useful at this point to look at the foundational principles of colonial governance. In *The Location of Culture* (1994), Homi Bhabha both summarizes and problematizes the issue. He says:

The exercise of colonialist authority ... requires the production of differentiations, individuations, identity effects through which discriminatory practices can map out subject populations that are tarred with the visible and transparent mark of power....What radically differentiates the exercise of colonial power is the unsuitability of the Enlightenment assumption of collectivity and the eye that beholds it.... Colonial authority requires modes of discrimination (cultural, racial, administrative ... that disallows a stable unitary assumption of collectivity. The "part" (which must be the colonialist foreign body) must be representative of the "whole" (conquered country), but the right of representation is based on its radical difference. (158)

This is an important tool to divide people by turning them into social and biological types at random will. On the social front, human beings have the ability to develop their relationship to the larger whole called community through a series of social contracts, allowing the individual to understand the import of personal self and social self. In the case of the colonial subject, however, the perceived differences and necessary negotiations between the individual and the collective are fraught with violence and disorder. In this situation, the representation of the colonial as an Other—as opposed to the self—is premised on the furtherance of division and the necessity for control and

order. The Other in this sense must be represented in order for its erasure. The emergence of the hybrid is a case in point, though the native of the ethnographer's imagination is not allowed the minimal epistemic space. As Bhabha says:

The discriminatory effects of the discourse of cultural colonialism, for instance, do not simply or singly refer to a "person," or to a dialectical power struggle between self and Other, or to a discrimination between mother culture and alien cultures. Produced through the strategy of disavowal, the reference of discrimination is always to a process of splitting as the condition of subjection: a discrimination between the mother culture and its bastards, the self and its doubles, where the trace of what is disavowed is not repressed but repeated as something different—a mutation, a hybrid. (Bhabha 153)

This point regarding mutant species is interesting as well as troubling. David Arnold, in his *Colonizing the Body: State Medicine and Epidemic Disease in Nineteenth-century India* (1993), points to the role of ethnographic divisions in creating body spaces or corporeal specificities. Even as he discusses the body-medicine discourse in colonial India, he sees how ethnography and anthropology repeatedly imply and work on a divide between the body as a corporeal entity and as an ethnic type. Arnold's most crucial observations on the issue can be cited here:

Colonial rule built up an enormous battery of texts and discursive practices that concerned themselves with the physical being of the colonized (and, no less critically, though the interconnection is too seldom recognized, of the colonizers implanted in their midst). Colonialism used or attempted to use the body as a site for the construction of its own authority, legitimacy, and control. In part, therefore, the history of colonial medicine ... serves to illustrate the more general nature of colonial power and knowledge and to illuminate its hegemonic as well as its coercive processes. Over the long period of British rule in India, the accumulation of medical knowledge about the body contributed to the political evolution and ideological articulation of the colonial system. (Arnold, 8-9)

Arnold rightly argues that colonial "medicine cannot be regarded as merely a matter of scientific interest. It cannot meaningfully be abstracted from the broader character of the colonial order. On the contrary, even in its moments of criticism and dissent, it remained integral to colonialism's political concerns, its economic intents, and its cultural

preoccupations” (9). This idea that the body emerges as a political space for a contest between the pre-colonial and the colonial can be seen from the fact that resistance to western discourse on the body is “a central element in the dialectics of power and knowledge in colonial India. It is partly for this reason to emphasize the importance of the body as a site of colonizing power and of contestation between the colonized and the colonizers but also in order to stress the corporeality of colonialism in India (rather in contrast with those whose primary emphasis has been upon colonialism as a "psychological state") that this study speaks of the ‘colonization of the body’ (8).

Arnold’s thesis links up nineteenth-century medicine and colonial politics with metaphorization of the body. In a way, the corporeality of colonialism is constituted by a transformative body space that is both discursive and concrete. Arnold’s observation, made in the context of medicine, is pertinent here:

The broad and interrelated nature of [colonial] scientific concerns, exemplified by the "medico-topographical" surveys produced from the 1820s onward ... also established a "topographical" or "environmentalist" tradition in India's colonial medicine which stubbornly persisted throughout the nineteenth century and beyond. (23)

The transformative nature of the discourse of medicine and disease is also evident in the world of landscape and spatial politics. Joanne Sharp’s observations in her *Geographies of Postcolonialism* on the transformation of landscapes and the transformative politics of colonial space are helpful here:

When it came to the landscape, colonialism was about transformation. Just as colonial knowledge sought *to order the world in a taxonomy of the known*, the engineers of the colonial landscape sought to order the colonies into a knowable pattern. Colonial landscapes were *ordered, sanitised, made amenable to regulation*, and structured to enhance the flow of economic activities. Thus, these landscapes did not simply reflect colonial aspirations but were also both consciously and unconsciously used as *social technologies*, as strategies of power to incorporate, categorise, discipline, control and reform the inhabitants of the city, town or plantation. (56; emphasis added)

What Sharp describes as “taxonomy of the known” or “social technologies” is represented in texts that look for—and repeatedly construct—specific enclosures based on ethnic habitats, the latter historicized and legitimated for a new spatial geography. This new spatial geography, once out or available in the discursive sphere, would order, sanitize, legitimize and replicate more such exercises. In this set-up, ethnic divides and ethnographic pockets will simultaneously be the condition and consequence of corporeal divides.

Given that colonial imagination views the mind of the colonized as an extension of his/her body (see Arnold, *Colonizing* 7-9; Clayton 459-62; Sharpe 23-24), the chapter also examines the overlapping of body and spatial politics. While the body is defined—feared or celebrated—by its socio-corporeal attributes such as habitat, costumes, food, utensils, rituals, sexual practices, the colonized body is circumscribed by these. In other words, the colonial ethnographic imaginary creates and foregrounds the body as space, resulting in the creation and construction of body-spaces.

In this connection, it is also important to note that the corpus colonial ethnographic texts is not only large and varied but also not always confined to titles on ethnography alone. It is illustrated by the fact that most of the Eurocentric genres with covert or overt participation in projects of imperial expansion are underscored by what Joan Pau Rubiés in his essay “Travel Writing and Ethnography,” describes as the “ethnographic impulse” (243). Rubiés traces the proliferation of the ethnographic impulse, historically to the period immediately following Renaissance and particularly to the relationship between colonial expansion and intellectual transformation. It points to the fact that ethnographic writings collaborate with the project of colonialism. It is not difficult to suggest that the ethnographic impulse also influences colonial travel writing. What problematises colonial ethnography is the degree to which it displays loyalty to imperial designs of domination and expansion.

From the perspective of colonizing space, colonial ethnography is often rooted in designs of surveying and partitioning space. As Cohn argues in *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge* (1997), “the surveillance modality” of colonial knowledge is an important instrumentality of containing possible violations of sociological orders (10). Two points emerge from here insofar as colonial knowledge production is concerned: one, it is

always implicated in imperatives of governmentality and, two; it functions in ways which essentially have an element of obscurity.

The obscurity of colonial texts is produced by layers of sub-textual information networks or vision underlying it, often in disguise. It is chiefly from its obscurity that colonial knowledge and colonial discourse derive their strength. In other words, what looks like the inherent mandate of colonial ethnography—that is, to map and divide, or alternately to divide and map, the physiological and cultural space occupied by the colonized body (presented and understood as demography or population)—derives from deep-rooted political designs to record, process, modify, sanitize (see Sharp 24; Clayton 463), and rule over colonized spaces.

It is in this sense that Talal Assad and others map out the colonial lineage of anthropology or ethnography in the book *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter* (1973). Similar arguments are also made by Diane Lewis in “Anthropology and Colonialism” (1973), and Peter Pels in “The Anthropology of Colonialism: Culture, History, and the Emergence of Western Governmentality” (1997). These scholars argue that while seemingly documenting various aspects of colonized spaces, ethnography regularly bypasses indigenous spatialities. This thesis is also reiterated by Paige West in “Translation, Value, and Space: Theorizing an Ethnographic and Engaged Environmental Anthropology” (2005). Harri Englund and James Leach in “Ethnography and the Meta-Narratives of Modernity” (2000), particularly critique the implicit colonizing agenda in ethnographic texts. They suggest that ethnographers often forcefully impose notions of European modernity while looking at social and corporeal spaces in areas outside Europe. This also draws attention to another important dimension of the spatial politics of ethnography, that is, the construction of symbolic space. Symbolism is, undoubtedly an inherent component of the textual and material practices of colonialism. It is explained better by the fact that the material artifice of the Empire always rests on the pillars of ideological constructs. As suggested by critics like Abdul JanMohamed (1995) and David Spurr (1993) such ideological exercises make regular use of rhetoric and metaphorization as colonizing strategies. It is not difficult to suggest that such ethnographic framings prepare favourable conditions for projects such as colonialism to operate.

The transformation of space into ethnoscares or ethno-corporeal space involves acts of metaphorization. This could also be viewed as the allegorization of space. In his article, “On Ethnographic Allegory” (1986), James Clifford explores the ways ethnographic texts participate in the transformation of spaces into cultural allegories. It is important to note that Clifford looks at ethnography as an instance of “inscription” rather than of “transcription” (118). In light of the argument offered by Clifford, it is obvious that ethnographic texts often bypass or even deliberately overlook immediate dimensions of space in favour of other potential layers of meaning. Clifford writes:

To say that exotic behaviors and symbols make sense either in “human” or “cultural” terms is to supply the same sorts of *allegorical added meaning*...*Culturalist* and *humanist allegories* stand behind the *controlled fictions of difference and similitude* that we call ethnographic accounts. What is maintained in these texts is *double attention* to the descriptive surface and to more abstract, comparative, and explanatory levels of meaning. (101; emphasis added)

In his work, Clifford suggests that ethnographic writings could be viewed as “historical” and “humanist” allegories (102). Ethnography, viewed as a historical allegory, frames people and places that are unfamiliar to the ethnographer, through tropes of primitivism. People and places are seen as belonging to some distance time. Ethnographies are humanist allegories in that they not only code unfamiliar landscapes into familiar frames of reference thereby reducing these to supposedly “elemental or transcendental levels of truth” (103). It is precisely by allegorizing that ethnographic texts reduce colonized spaces into a cluster of ideologically constructed narratives of otherness. As Clifford rightly suggests, ethnographical texts transform cultural spaces unfamiliar to the ethnographer, into symbolic or moral geographies. He also suggests that this transformation involves strategies of “expansion, reduction, substitution and transference” (106). This is where ethnography converts itself from transcription to inscription. Therefore, the role of ethnography in creating and transforming space cannot be overstated.

Clifford’s thesis of ethnography as allegory offers useful perspectives to understand the key role of ethnographic writings in projects of colonial space-production. Another important thesis on the convergence of ethnography and the Empire comes from

Nicholas Thomas in his study *Colonialism's Culture: Anthropology, Travel and Government* (1994). Thomas suggests that as an important genre of colonial culture, anthropology and, by implication, ethnography plays a crucial role in “surveying, regulating, and sanitizing” colonized spaces (6). Highlighting the collaboration between travel, anthropology, and colonialism, Thomas argues that all these are constitutive of each other (7). So far as the transformation of space is concerned, the most important insight that emerges from Thomas’s thesis is that ethnographic imaginaries convert polyphonic, or heteroglossic socio-cultural geographies to a series of physical and cultural attributes. In his study, Thomas refers to the regular use of primitivism as a trope of othering (171). He also suggests that what appears to be reification and fetishization of notionally simple ways of life of particular groups of people, in colonial ethnographic and travel writing, are political attempts at denigrating the group. As suggested by him, one regular strategy, in these writings, is to transform the body of the colonized into a metaphor of bestiality. Thomas rightly calls it “bestialization”(14). It is important to recall that David Spurr in his *Rhetoric of Empire* refers to the regular use of debasement as a trope in colonial discourse (12). It is possible to suggest, with insights from scholars like Clifford and Thomas, ethnography is an important participant in projects of Empire-building.

It is the transformation of space into allegories that explains the view of ethnographic narratives as ideological instruments of the Empire. As suggested above, ethnography functions through an inherent symbolism or the use of Eurocentric cultural ideas to frame cultural identities as naturalized. This has important implications for the transformation of space into a dichotomy between the self and the Other, which in colonial situations corresponds to the dichotomy between culture and nature. As emerges from discussions of the texts in this chapter, ethnographic writings often exploit rhetorical strategies such as denigration, transference, displacement, reification, fetishization to transform space to ethnoscape. As subsequent discussions suggest, the body of the colonized plays an important role in this rhetorical transformation of space into ethnoscaples.

It is with an understanding of ethnography as allegory and more specifically, of ethnography’s participation in the transformation of space to symbolic geographies, that this chapter investigates the select texts. The chapter argues that ethnographic texts in the colonial northeast transform the body of the colonized not only as a corporeal space with a certain type of physical and other attributes but also as a signpost to mark spaces.

In other words, it argues that bodies in the colonial northeast are converted in these texts into strategic instruments or metaphors to transform supposedly unmarked spaces into an ethnoscape. To put it differently, nineteenth-century anthropological narratives specifying details of human groups—say the Abors or the Nagas or Singphos—inhabiting the northeastern region are almost coterminous with the construction of exclusive spatial enclosures specific to particular ethnic groups. For example, having identified the Naga as a bio-ethnic type—as markedly distinct from the Apatani—the traveler-ethnographer makes it a point to mark spaces that belong to the Naga or the Apatani. This knowledge production exercise is not to be seen in isolation from colonial power-play. The exercise—professionally, an anthropologist’s delight or a statistician’s headache, as it were—seen in ethnographic texts would eventually create the roadmap for colonial cartography. This prelude to cartography—marking, partitioning and portioning-off of land and territory in terms of the ethnic composition of the inhabitants—would affect not only the northeast but the entire country. Given the nature of the exercise—contentious, sly and ‘political’ from the beginning—the present conundrum of map-making and state formation in the northeast can perhaps be traced back to the work begun by colonial travel writing and its many allies such as expedition writing and ethnographic writing. In the same way, as caste was ‘discovered’ by the colonial anthropologist to run the Empire, ethnotropes and ethnospaces were constructed by the travel and expedition texts to first occupy the northeast. The next logical step would be to convert the occupied spaces into assets.

I

Edward Tuite Dalton (1815-1880), is often viewed as one of the pioneering ethnographers in colonial Eastern India. His *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal* (1872), is seen as an important text of colonial ethnography in India. It is important to note that Dalton came to India to serve as a soldier in the British army and participated in expeditions against some of the hill-tribes in the northeast east during the years 1839-1840. The fact that the first edition of the narrative is published by the colonial Government of Bengal points to the convergence of interest between ethnography and the Empire. It is also important to mention, that the usual tendency to approach the narrative only as an ethnographic text often overlooks the important fact that it is a consequence of extensive travels. This study picks up his text to investigate the transformation of the colonial northeast into a certain kind of ethnoscape in the narratives

of the imperial traveler-ethnographer. To this extent, the text is seen as an illustration of ethnographic imaginary and colonial space production.

As suggested by Bernard Cohn in *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (1997), one of the key strategies used by the British to transform India into a legible and governable imperial space is the “surveillance modality” (10). By the term “surveillance modality” Cohn refers to the colonial strategies of marking and distribution of space so as to keep surveillance over potential transgressors. It is possible to read the narratives of Dalton and Waddell in this light.

Dalton’s text is one of the earliest attempts to incorporate newly acquired and supposedly unmapped spaces in the northeast into already well-established grids of colonial ethnography. In other words, it reframes the northeast into a classified, enumerated and documented space. However, in doing so, such narratives reduce the polyphonic social space of the region into a repertoire of stock-images and typifications, which, to a great extent, replicate the visual priorities of the colonial gaze. As subsequent discussions suggest, the gaze of the colonial traveler-ethnographer Dalton bears traces of the strategies adopted by travelers discussed in the previous chapter.

The production of ethnoscape in the text begins with attempts to trace out and thereby fix people to particular landscapes. For instance:

The Phakis or Phakials [a tribe in Upper Assam] *on the Dihingriver*, the Kamjangs [a tribe in Upper Assam] and the numerous settlements of Khamtis [a tribe in Upper Assam] are all colonies of this race, retaining the costume, customs, and religion they brought with them into the valley. *It will be sufficient to describe the latter, who are the most numerous and important.* (9; emphasis added)

The passage illustrates the way the traveler-ethnographer attempts to construct a geography of exactitude and precision while transforming space into ethnoscape. It is also important to note that a particular tribe is identified as more important than the others, in the passage. This also needs to be seen in light of the argument made in the next chapter that projects of Empire-building in the northeast often involves the marking of the indigenous population either as potential threats or as assets. It is not unusual that

a particular group of people identified as potential assets is often seen in favourable light by the traveler-ethnographer.

For instance, Dalton writes: “The Khamtis are very far in advance of all the north-eastern frontier tribes in knowledge, arts, and civilization. They are Buddhists and have regular establishments of priests well-versed in the recondite mysteries of their religion, a large proportion of the laity can read and write in their own language” (10). The traveler-ethnographer often gazes at the social and cultural space shared by a particular group, with an intention to find out supposed markers of civilization, which are defined along Eurocentric ideas. For example, possessing a scripted language is seen as an obligatory qualification for a group of people to be recognized as civilized, within the text. For instance, commenting on the Singphos, Dalton writes: “Their religion is a *rude paganism*” (16; emphasis added). It is noteworthy that the indigenous religious or cultural space is negative with the help of certain culturalist notions. For instance: “The Singphos have a *confused notion of a Supreme Being*, but they propitiate only *malignant spirits*. They sacrifice, fowls, pigs and dogs to them” (16; emphasis added). Similarly: “The religion of the Mishmis is *confined to the propitiation of demons* whenever illness or misfortune visits them. On these occasions, the spirit of a plant is placed at the door to intimate to strangers that the house is for the time under taboo. *They appear to have no notion of a Supreme and benevolent deity*” (20; emphasis added). It is important to note that the traveler-ethnographer himself claims to attend scenes when the indigenous people perform their “wild demoniacal dance” (21). These instances substantiate the argument that the transformation of the place to an ethnoscape involves strategies of insubstantialization, vilification, and negation.

As later instances suggest, some of the regular culturalist frames going into the coding of tribal social landscapes in the text are- comments on the organization of the housing or domestic space into public and private, the state of agricultural and other utensils, costumes, marriage, and burial customs etc. For instance referring to the food of the Naga people, he writes: “In regard to food they are truly omnivorous- frogs, lizards, snakes, rats, dogs, monkeys, cats etc. are all delicacies, and an *animal that has died a natural death is as acceptable to them as the best butcher’s meat* (49; emphasis added). It goes without saying that these frames serve as political tropes and regularly participate in colonial politics of allegorizing space.

It is remarkable that even though a particular tribe is recognized as culturally advanced, the traveler-ethnographer cannot refrain from debasing or vilifying it in some way or the other. For instance: “The Khamtis are not *a handsome race*. They are of rather *darker complexion* than the other Shans, and of *coarser features*; the Mongolian peculiarities being more strongly developed in them than in their reputed brethren” (11; emphasis added). Similarly: “After setting in Assam, the Khamti chiefs frequently took to themselves Assamese wives, and in some families, the effect of this mingling is very marked in *softening* and improving the features of the generations that follow it” (11; emphasis added). It is obvious that the text converts corporeal bodies of the indigenous people into a landscape of otherness. If the first instance illustrates how Eurocentric ideas of beauty are employed to vilify the indigenous people as a corporal body, the second example shows the rhetoric of improvement in operation. It is also not difficult to discern traces of racist ideas in the traveler-ethnographer’s gaze in this instance.

The narrative often uses bestiality as a trope to allegorize the corporal bodies of the indigenous people into a geography of difference. For instance: “The Mishmis are a short sturdy race of fair complexion for Asiatics, well-knit figures and *active as monkeys*; they vary much in feature, generally exhibiting a rather softened phase of the Mongolian type” (22; emphasis added). This needs to be seen in the light of the regular use of bestializing tropes in narratives like that of Butler and Woodthorpe in the previous chapter. It is only usual that negatives tropes are also extended to comment on other aspects of the ethno-corporeal body:

They are much dreaded by the Sadiya population in consequence of their *prowling expeditions* to kidnap women and children. They are full of *deceit*. *They come down in innocent looking parties of men and women to the plains, apparently groaning under the weight of the basket of the merchandize, they are importing for barter. They proceed thus till they find an unprotected village, then throwing aside their fictitious loads, they pounce on the women and children, and carry them off to the hills.* (23; emphasis added)

The text is replete with such instances of constructing the hill tribes as habitual kidnapers and raiders. On another occasion, Dalton writes: “They supply themselves and the Abor [a tribe in Arunachal Pradesh] with clothing, and their textile fabrics of all kinds always well at the Saikwah market. It was very interesting to watch the barter that

took place *between these suspicious, excitable savages and the cool, wily traders of the plains*” (24; emphasis added). What is noteworthy is the attempt to transform the places into a symbolic ethnoscape. Dalton writes:

The former [the Mishmis] took salt chiefly in exchange for the commodities they brought down, and they would not submit to its being measured or weighed them by any known process. Seated in front of the traders’ stall, they take from a well-guarded basket one of the articles they wish to exchange. Of this, they still retain a hold with their toe or their knee as they plunge *two dirty paws into the bright white, salt*. They make an attempt to transfer all they can grasp to their own basket, but the trader, with a sweep of his hand, knocks off half the quantity, and then there is a fiery altercation. (25; Emphasis added)

Dalton regularly employs rhetoric to twist description of actually observed sights to transform the bodies of the indigenous people to symbolic sites of otherness. For instance, describing his experience of witnessing the performance of dance by the Mishmis, he writes:

The first scene represented a peaceful villager with his children hoeing in the ground, and singing and conversing with them as if utterly unconscious of danger. A *villainous looking crop-head glides in like a snake scarce seen in the long grass, takes note of the group, and glides away again. Presently armed savages are seen in the distance. They come gradually and stealthily on, till within a convenient distance they stop and watch their prey like so many cats, then there is a rush in, the man is supposed to be killed, and the children carried screeching away.* (25; emphasis added).

This is another attempt to reiterate the myth of indigenous brutality and the allegory of otherness.

The text also indulges in constructing ethnoscape as moral cartography. For example, commenting on the Khamti women, Dalton writes:

The Khamti women have not suffered in character from the freedom allowed to them. The ladies of the Ahom families in Assam are equally unrestricted; indeed, till the occupation of the country by aliens of our introduction, the seclusion of even well-born Hindu maidens were not enforced, and to the present day, I

believe, the ladies of the ex-royal family are in the habit of visiting the officials when they have an opportunity of doing so. (12)

This is an example of vilification or negativization of the indigenous people. The narrative constructs the Singphos, a tribe in the northeast, as habitual night-raiders lacking in the courage of confronting the enemy: “In warfare, their attacks are confined to night-surprises, which are speedily abandoned if they meet with steady opposition ... if they fail by such means to beat off the attack at once, they abandon the positions for another behind it” (15). It could be seen as an instance of reducing people to stereotypes.

The politics of allegorization is often carried out through acts of reduction. In such an act of reduction, Dalton comments:

The Khamtis have two great religious festivals in the year, one to celebrate the birth, the other to mourn the death, of Gautama. At these ceremonies, boys dressed up as girls go through posture dances...as a more distinct commemoration of the birth, a lively representation of an accouchement is acted. One of the boy girls is put to bed and waited on by the others. Presently something like infantile cries are heard, and from beneath the dress of the invalid a young puppy dog is produced squeaking, and carried away and bathed, and treated as a new-born babe. (12)

The ethnographer-traveler transforms crucial social and cultural spaces in the northeast frontier to a series of facts. In other words, he erases traces of other important dimensions, the practice of such rituals might involve.

It is possible to suggest that the traveler-ethnographer Dalton reproduces select aspects of the social geography of the colonial northeast, especially these viewed as immediately connected to the corporeal body as evidence of racial and cultural inadequacies. To this extent, his text transforms the northeast body not only into a metaphor of otherness, but also a potential space for intervention.

II

The next text chosen for investigation is L. A. Waddell’s *The Tribes of the Brahmaputra Valley* (1901). Serving as a medical officer under the colonial government Lawrence Augustine Waddell produced a body of writing primarily of medical interest. For ten

years from 1885 he was Assistant Sanitary Commissioner, and from 1888 to 1895 he was Medical Officer for the Darjeeling District. From 1896 for six years he was Professor of Chemistry and Pathology in Calcutta Medical College. Waddell edited the *Indian Medical Gazette* for a few years and also took part in some of the military operations of the empire.

The text is also subtitled as “A Contribution on their Physical Types and Affinities” was originally published in the *Journal of the Asiatic Society of Bengal* in 1900. The observations made in the text relate to about six hundred individuals belonging to over thirty tribes. It is also important to note that Waddell’s text claims to offer, for the first time, exact anthropometrical and other physical details of the tribes of the Brahmaputra valley and the adjoining hills. Purely on the basis of his scholarly interest, Waddell could be viewed as an orientalist. It is reflected in his interest in Buddhism, Buddhist art leading to works like *Among the Himalayas* (1899), *The Buddhism of Tibet or Lamaism* (1894), and *Lhasa and its Mysteries* (1905). He also took a keen interest in exploring the ancient relations of India to the Mesopotamian world as reflected in *Indo-Sumerian Seals Deciphered* (1925). It is also important to note that Waddell tried to establish the Aryans as the architects of civilization in *The Makers of Civilization in Race and History* (1929).

The text follows the most prevalent format of colonial ethnography offering an encyclopedia-like mapping of the tribes, wherein the descriptive notes on the tribes are arranged alphabetically. The narrative makes ambitious claims to survey and document the physical features and social traits of the tribes. The text follows the conventions of colonial ethnography and primarily relies on enumeration and classification of the tribes. Interestingly however, the text also offers a hierarchical map of the tribes. It is clear that narratives like this are interested in partitioning ethnic groups in terms of already decided ethnic features. This kind of partitioning also results in dividing physical and socio-cultural spaces so that they could be developed for enhancement of economic and administrative grids. In other words, geography-making and ethnoscaping are exercises that come through as colonial surpluses in these narratives.

Apart from the fact that the text is implicated in imperatives of colonial governmentality, it is possible to argue that it is implicated in projects of constructing the Eastern frontier as a symbolic cultural geography. As suggested earlier, the idea of symbolic otherness almost regularly determines the construction of landscape and territories in the given

context. However, the politics of symbolization or allegorization, which remains oblique in spatialization along these dimensions, is more obvious in ethnographic discourse. It is perhaps explained by the fact that symbolic geography, in colonial situations is primarily related to the production of cultural space.

It is important to explore channels chosen by Waddell's narrative to pursue such projects, with a focus on the ways the body is formulated, recognized, theorized and aesthetically read and analyzed within it. However, it is not to lose sight of the ways the narrative collapses the entire region into frames of spatial and temporal otherness. It is obvious from the way in which the region and bodies within it are framed as ethnographic curios and spectacles. Waddell writes: "Few of the *wilder parts* of the world, still left, preserve such a vast variety of *savage tribes* of such great ethnological interest as the mountainous valley of the mighty Brahmaputra" (1; emphasis added). It is important to note that the text specifically identifies the hill-space as the "last *refuge* of scattered detachments of *primitive hordes*" (1; emphasis added). Waddell again writes:

Driven into these *wild glens* by the advance of civilization up the plains and lower valleys these people have become hemmed in among the mountains, where pressing on each other in their struggle for existence, they have developed into innumerable isolated tribes, differing widely in appearance, customs, and language; but all alike have been engaged in *blood-thirsty feuds, head-hunting* and *numerous raids* on their more defenseless neighbours. Many of them are of that *extremely barbarous type* which is popularly associated with *savage South Africa*. (1; emphasis added)

This passage only furthers the disparaging rhetoric that has already been initiated. It is obvious in the way a panorama of violence is formulated. It illustrates how certain predetermined notions or cultural assumptions pass as ethnographic documentation. The traveler-ethnographer constructs the hill-man as a fugitive, running away from what in colonial discourse is seen as a space of civilization, namely the plains. As discussed in the next chapter, the colonial traveler often frames the hill tribes of the northeast as a run-away from civilization. It is also important to note that these attempts to frame the hillman as a fugitive from civilization consolidates into a full-fledged narrative of the hillman as a habitual transgressor. The use of words such as refuge, driven etc. in the passage reinforces the allegory of otherness. It is remarkable that Waddell tries to draw an

analogy between instances of savagery in the northeast and in Africa. Reiterating the narrative of savagery, he writes: “The *wild hillmen*, bordering the Assamese plain, were little affected by the British occupation until recent years. They proved to be so hostile, and their country so impenetrable... subjects” (2; emphasis added). This could be viewed as an illustration of the way colonial ethnography formulates generic identities. The text is replete with such attempts to construct homogenized, essentialised prototypes of savagery.

Waddell’s narrative transforms the northeast into a geography of civilizational and temporal otherness, primarily by using images of primitivism as spatial tropes. One of the obvious strategies is to repeatedly claim that the region belongs to some distant times. For instance:

These tribes which have hitherto been isolated from the outside world are *fast losing their primitive customs*. It is not an uncommon sight to see a *Naga* who only three years ago was a naked *head-hunting savage* of the most pronounced type, now clad in a tweed coat and carrying a Manchester umbrella, taking his ticket at a railway station. (2; emphasis added)

Waddell campaigns for the validity of his project, reiterating the need to preserve. He further writes: “The little that is known is just sufficient to show that many of them are in a much more primitive condition than the wildest tribes of India; and here, almost at our very doors is a unique mine of unexplored material... to solve many important problems respecting the origins of our civilization” (3). The passage suggests how culturally derived doctrines of human evolution inflects the narrative. But what is more important is that the traveler-ethnographer generates a certain kind of space to intervene, even though he does it by posing as a benevolent knowledge-seeker.

The narrative tries to confirm the negative or inferior civilizational status of the hillman by converting the system of matrilineal descent prevalent in the hills into a proof of the uncivilized state of the hillman’s existence. “In this part of Indo-China still persists, amongst the Garos, Kasias, and the wilder Koch tribes, that once widespread primitive stage of society... the maternal form of the family—in which descent is traced through the mother, and not through the father, as in civilized society” (3). In the narrative, whereas some of the tribes are assigned positions between the uncivilized state of social existence represented by the matrilineal system of descent, those following a patrilineal a

system descent, are marked as less uncivilized. For instance: “Others again, such as the *Miris*, are in a transition stage from the maternal to the paternal. They retain survivals of the maternal stage, but appear only recently to have adopted the paternal” (3). What is important to note is the eagerness with which mark or state of civilizations is sought to be mapped on modes of descent and the hillmen of the region are transformed into a personification of otherness. Towards such end, ambitious conjectures are often made. For instance, explaining the racial context of the population, Waddell writes:

The race-wars which raged in this area in ancient times have left little evidence beyond those vestiges which survive in the names of rivers and certain places. This was doubtless owing to the wildness and illiterateness of the tribes concerned, for Assam has the misfortune not to possess anything worthy of the name of ancient history.(9)

It is noteworthy that despite the claim of unavailability of credible historical evidence, the traveler-ethnographer promptly calls into service preconceived ideas to back his moves to allegorize. While the remark on historical records and historical evidence would appear credible in the case of the hill-tribes, Waddell is certainly off the mark when he talks about Assam’s ancient history. For, Assam not only has extraordinary records of history in the ancient period in the form of ruins and archival sites, the importance of Assam in ancient history is borne out by the records available elsewhere in India. The fact that *The Mahabharata* and *Kalikapurana*, to mention two of the seminal Puranic texts, have extended accounts of Assam or Kamrup not only shows Waddell’s inadequate knowledge of the region but also his unwillingness to look for the right kind of evidence away from what was perhaps immediately available to him (see Gait, Kakati).

In ethnographic writings, the construction of the body is mediated through racial and climatic gazes. In other words, the body of the native is inherently enmeshed in well-formulated cultural ideologies. It is important to note the enframing of the physical, temperamental and cultural body of the native into theories of racial degeneration and purity. As seen in Dalton’s construction of the Khamtis, the transformation of the hillmen of the northeast into a generic construct, especially within texts of colonial ethnography, in a way corresponds to a certain kind of imprisoning. In other words, the body of the indigenous inhabitants of the northeast is caught between ethnotropes of

savagery and degeneracy. It draws attention to another important point. Whereas the trope of savagery imprisons the body of the colonized into a geography of otherness, the traveler-ethnographer closes the possibilities of a so-called improvement on the part of the colonized by framing any forward move to integrate with the supposedly superior cultures as leading only to degeneracy. In a way, the ethnographic gaze ensures that the indigene remain as a liminal space.

It is important to situate Waddell's construction of the native body in the ideologically calibrated framework of racial otherness. It is not unusual that the same allegorical referents go into the specific construction of the individual tribes. For instance, Waddell writes: "The Abors are a *wild, independent* mongoloid tribe at the northeastern end of the Brahmaputra valley, are amongst the most *savage and least accessible* of all the tribes. Yet they are of exceptional interest in that they are supposed to represent the primitive horde" (12; emphasis added). Apart from highlighting the ethno-trope of savagery and seclusion that encompasses the construction of the native along most of the dimensions, the passage also illustrates the reduction and objectification of the native as an ethnographic curio.

Exploring the reductionist and allegorical manner in which ethnography functions, Arjun Appadurai in his essay "Putting Hierarchy in Its Place" (1988), refers to how ethnography "incarcerates" (37), the natives in bounded localities, map essentialised cultures on to bounded territories, and deploy strategies of "metonymic freezing" (36), through which select aspects of people's lives are presented in generic frames. Nicholas Thomas views the same as a trick and trope of "naturalized typification" (91). The metonymic freezing of the frontier hill-man as hostility and savagery personified is obvious in the way the Abor, a hill tribe in the region, is described. "They seem to be the dreaded cannibal 'Black *Lo* savages' of the Tibetans, in whose country the Indian Survey-explorer, K. P was turned back" (13). Waddell remarks that they need to be kept out of the frontier markets precisely on account of their "lawlessness and turbulence" which only complements the fiction of savagery (13). It is noteworthy that an imaginative analogy is again sought to be established by invoking the image of African cannibalism.

What is more important is Waddell's endeavor to validate the fiction of savagery with claims of empirical observation. Describing the scene of his bargain with the Abors for participating in his ethnographic project, Waddell writes:

I succeeded in measuring only seven men, six of whom had come to Dibrugarh market to barter gold-dust and rubber, at my visit a few years ago when communication was still open. Their demand, as the price of their submitting to be photographed and measured *surprised* and *amused* me. They insisted that in addition to a present in money I must give each of them a flat hat! To this *curious stipulation* I had therefore to consent on condition that the articles of attire were procurable in the market; and strange to say they were procurable. *The savage nature* of the men was evident when the hats were brought. Although these latter were all alike, the men *sarled and shouted* and *quarreled* amongst themselves for sometime, each thinking the other had got a better one than himself; and one of them drew his knife threatening on his fellow tribesman. (13; emphasis added)

In another instance of allegorization, Wadell writes: "The men are *thickest, uncouth, and clumsy*. They have remarkably deep *harsh* voices with a slow, deliberate utterance. Many of them are *disfigured* by goiter. They are *excessively rough mannered*. Mr. Needham was besieged day and night by a mob of these people" (15). Similarly: "The hair in both sexes is cropped short, chopped off with a knife, probably *to get rid of the trouble of keeping it clean*" (15). What is overplayed in these passages are- traits like rudeness, noise, and ugliness of the people. These could be viewed as an attempt to debase or defile the hillman of the northeast. Framing the tribe as a cultural blackness, Wadell writes: "They do not count beyond the number of their fingers. They have little knowledge of the arts. Their swords and hatchets are not made by themselves but imported either from Assam or Tibet" (16). It is obvious that preconceived notions of tribal ignobility inform the description.

The allegorization of the body into a site of subhuman otherness extends to the traveler-ethnographer's comments on the indigenous costumes: "The dress of the men in their primitive state, consists of the fibrous bark of the Udal tree, tied round the loins in strips about fifteen inches long and hanging down behind like a *bushy tail*. It also serves as a *mat, to sit on and a pillow* at night" (15). Describing the Nagas, he writes: "The heads thus treacherously taken are nevertheless considered to be honorable *trophies*, as much

so as if they had been taken in equal warfare” (21; emphasis added). Likewise, the Abor costume is transformed into an appendage of bestiality, the costume of the Angamis becomes a potent statement of the tribe’s bestiality. Waddell writes: “This gaudy attire of the males quite eclipses that of the females, as the rule *in the lower animal world*. For, the dress of the women is much less showy than that of the men” (23; emphasis added). The narrative transforms the body of the tribes of the northeast into a metaphor of savagery. For instance, the Angami Nagas are represented as the “most warlike and bloodthirsty” of all the “head-hunting” Nagas and the finest in physique (20).

What marks these instances is the attempt not only to transform but also to belittle the body the northeasterner. A natural existence is seen by the colonial ethnographer-traveler as a primitive existence. Even while invoking the cultural allegory of a mat and pillow, it is directed at fortifying the allegory of savagery. Similarly, the use of the image of the tail has symbolic undertones and could be seen as an attempt at de-familiarizing the native body.

It is clear that the gaze of the ethnographer transforms the native body into a site of difference, in the process collapsing all communities into one ‘native’—exotic but inferior—community. The narratives pick up the tribes of the northeast as if to meet formulaic and pre-decided dimensions of physical features, cultural practices and temperament. Each narrative further marks off the dwellings, dresses, weapons, faith, and funeral practices of the tribes. Ironically, the primary purpose of these markings is to highlight imagined and exaggerated difference of appearance and coarseness of manners. It must be noted that these accounts are driven by an allegory of Empire, foregrounding the difference of the native from the European, and yet diminishing and erasing any note of difference and distinction between tribes.

III

It can be said, on the basis of the texts examined here, that colonial travel and expedition writings transform the corporal bodies of indigenous groups in the northeast into a geography of otherness. More importantly, these writings transform the northeast into a cluster of ethno-corporeal spaces. The traveler- ethnographer marks spaces as exclusive homelands or territories of particular tribes. This is done primarily by formulating particular set of corporeal, cognitive and cultural attributes for a particular group of people and subsequently tracing out these attributes in landscapes identified as exclusive

homelands of exclusive groups. This practice could be viewed as a mode of demographic othering of space. Given the fact that such marking of space is almost always followed by more ambitious projects of mapping and distribution of space such as cartography, the transformation of space into ethnoscapes is better seen as a prelude to colonial governance. The conversion of space to ethnoscapes could be seen as an overture towards transforming the supposedly unmapped spaces in the northeast into more precisely mapped places.

Given the role colonial travel and ethnographic texts play in facilitating larger projects of mapping and distribution of space by the Empire, this form of writing is best viewed as a foundational instrument of Empire-building. The construction of space, therefore, is a condition and consequence of travel and expedition, and, by extension, of travel and expedition writing.

At another level, this exercise can be said to inform the political unrest and competitive identity-formation in the northeast at present. The foundations for the present conundrum of map-making and state formation in the northeast, on closer analysis, can be said to have been laid by colonial travel writing and its many allies such as expedition writing and ethnographic writing.