Coming to America: Re-inventing and re-using the 1903 Delhi durbar

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Abstract: The 1903 Delhi durbar was a historically significant event designed to celebrate British sovereignty over India. The durbar’s pageantry re-appeared in the United States in various formats that ignored its original political purpose but adopted its imposed and invented princely traditions. These dissimilar milieus—stereoviews, postcards of Luna Park in Coney Island and circus parades—reached their respective peaks in commodifying orientalist excess for the American public at the start of the twentieth century. The interrelated presentations of durbars embodying foreignness served a symbolic function in a multicultural America grappling with issues of social inclusion. As they re-packaged the extravagance of the durbar’s visuality to provide its appeal as public entertainment, the American versions used the durbar’s characterization of India as the embodiment of the exotic to contrast with the modernity of life in America. This dichotomy was useful in contributing to the cultural dimensions of a collective identity at a critical period of changing American demographics that was swelled by new waves of immigration.

Keywords: American identity; circus; Coney Island; India; Luna Park; popular culture; postcards; parades; stereoviews; foreignness in the arts

1. Introduction

The Delhi Durbars were three ceremonies—in 1877, 1903, and 1911—held to honor the British monarchs as the supreme leaders of India, the “jewel in the crown” of the British Empire. It would be expected that the effect in the US of these British-centric events, occurring halfway around the world more than 100 years after American independence from Britain, would have been minimal. While politically this may have been the case, the durbars provided a legacy in the adopted trope of orientalist extravagance and difference that echoed throughout American mass entertainment for decades. This essay will focus on the 1903 durbar and its transition to popular culture through an examination of three of its visual expressions in America—stereoviews, Luna Park postcards, and circus parade posters.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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PUBLIC INTEREST STATEMENT

This paper examines the various mechanisms by which the 1903 Delhi durbar was reproduced in American culture, specifically stereoviews, amusement park attractions and circus parades, during the first half of the twentieth century. The paper also presents some ideas regarding their social functions, particularly with respect to changing definitions of American identity.
Scholars have sought to establish the three durbars as singular events that created and consolidated the image and traditions of British sovereignty over India (Allen, 2000; Codell, 2012; Cohn, 1983). Subsumed in this larger narrative, and often overlooked, is that a constructed orientalist Indian identity can also be attributed, at least partly, to the styling of the durbars. It is this legacy, celebrating the idea of foreignness, that was used by institutions in the United States for its visual and performative value.

In the durbar adapted by Americans, the political issues of power and control on the part of the British monarchy were mostly absent. Instead, the durbar was used for its invented indigenized princely traditions, its “pervasive, exotic alterity,” a phrase Elizabeth Edwards has used with respect to photographs (Edwards, 2008, p. 243). This otherness is more general than specific issues of race and gender as markers of difference that have been considered elsewhere (Davis, 1993, 2002; Lindfors, 1984; Poignant, 2003, 2004; Rydell & Kroes, 2005). Class was a non-issue for these three durbar formats, since they were designed as entertainment for the working masses. The durbar’s manifestations were transferred to an American context that was faced with the need to integrate a huge influx of immigrants. For the native-born, the durbar provided an opportunity to glimpse a country that they would, for the most part, not see personally, and served as the essence of difference. For the foreign-born, the durbar presented a culture that was so foreign it made their own unique customs seem relatively inconsequential. Mass culture’s “nationalizing and democratizing propensities” (Rydell & Kroes, 2005, p. 21) made use of themes such as the durbar in the development of a national identity by embedding leisure-time entertainment with exotic foreignness, in contrast to the “rationality and modernity” of American industrialization.

This construct of “oriental” excess served as a contrast to ideas of America as a progressive advanced country at this time. The effect was to distance the culture of India, and define its otherness, rather than bind it, as was the original purpose of the Indian durbars and Britain. At a time when Americans were grappling with issues of social integration, staging “the other,” as Edward Said (1978) theorized, would have contributed toward Americans’ definition of their sense of national cultural identity, whether native- or foreign-born. Commercial interests took advantage of three popular entertainment “mediums”—photography, amusement parks and the circus—in the late nineteenth-early twentieth centuries that were associated with what we now consider to be orientalist attitudes toward the foreign (Behdad & Gartlan, 2013; Davis, 1993, 2002; Geary & Webb, 1998; Kasson, 1978). As Holly Edwards stated, “Ultimately, the entertainment industry proved to be the key agent of dissemination for twentieth-century American Orientalism. It served to visualize and then institutionalize stereotypes, eventually projecting them even beyond American horizons into the cultures that they presumed to depict” (Edwards, 2000, p. 215). These stereotypical attitudes served as a marked contrast to the meaning of being American, with its emphasis at this time on industrialized modernity.

Charles R. Simpson has also argued that popular culture can be considered a “civil religion” for uniting disparate groups in a society, a “skim of civility on a sea of conflicting interests” (Simpson, 1984, p. 157). His concept of social solidarity (p. 172) was harnessed to reinforce nationalism through a population’s exposure to shared iconography, contributing to a sense of belonging. This notion is consistent with the use of mass culture as a source for “ethno-symbolism,” which establishes or strengthens national identity (Smith, 2009). Such symbols may rely on “boundary delineation” (Smith, 2009, p. 46), creating national limits and characterizations, in effect contrasting a shared American pseudo-ethnicity with its “others.” Boundaries may be either territorial or, in such cases as those generated by popular culture, figurative. These manifestations of the durbar in the US, by emphasizing its most exotic qualities of foreignness, worked as symbolic references toward clarifying a shared American modern cultural identity that was otherwise quite complex in its definition and components.

2. The British and the princes: durbars as empire
Durbar is a term of Persian origin used in India to describe the ritual of government retainers coming together to pay their respects to their royal leader, a formal audience accompanied by much ceremony. Although there were many localized durbars in India, the three major events in Delhi were
It has been argued that the British encouraged, if not created, the structure and paraphernalia of this princely eminence in accordance with their development of protocols for the durbars, particularly the first one (Cohn, 1983, p. 180; Metcalf, 1994; Nuckolls, 1990; Trevithick, 1990). This was part of a larger transformation that Bernard Cohn characterized as “orientalizing India” (Cohn, 1996, p. 121). The British-created durbars modified elements of existing Indian traditions to translate their foreign imperial presence to the local cultural vernacular, while solidifying oppositional national identities. As part of their “packaging” of India to explain the British place in it, or over it, the colonials shaped the idea of India by codifying, mapping and capturing (through photography) India’s history, languages, peoples, clothing, architecture, art, law, religions, etc. to justify their management role (Cohn, 1996; Metcalf, 1994). The original durbars played an important role in ritualizing and creating visual documentation of this account of control.

At the time of the 1903 durbar, hundreds of princely states exercised varying degrees of sovereignty over large swaths of India, in their respective geographic areas, in spite of being subservient to the British (Ramusack, 2004). The British apportioned symbols of status to provide the princes with the appearance of authority in their regions, as indicators of their legitimate rule (Ramusack, 1978, p. 12), regardless of the limitations placed on their role outside their fiefdoms. This suited the British concept of a classed society, based on its own social structure, which they sought to replicate in the colonies (Cannadine, 2001, p. 21). It also was consistent with the Mughal tradition of authority vested in an individual for whom clothing was imbued with connotations of rank. The durbars provided a rare opportunity to flaunt this stratification on a more public stage, thus simultaneously embracing the princely identity while undermining its power and control.

Figure 1. H.H. the Rajah of Jind, H.H. the Rajah of Tippera, H.H. the Rajah of Kapurthala, H.H. the Nawab of Rampur, H.H. the Rajah of Sirmur and H.H. the Maharajah of Benares, Coronation Durbar Illustrated, Delhi, Vest and Co., Madras (1903, p. 16).
The visual and performative highlights of the 1903 durbar were the processions through Delhi into the amphitheater (Figure 1), and the presentation of the princes to the representatives of the British crown. Crowds lined the streets as the procession passed, taking hours, while still more observers filled the grandstands of the amphitheater. Lord Curzon, Viceroy of India, and the others in charge of the durbar encouraged the princes to dress in their most elaborate clothing and jewels, and to bring extensive retinues. This very “Indian-ness” of the extravagance created its splendid visual imagery, including elephants, turbans, howdahs, jewels, and other elegant trappings. As Lord Curzon wrote, “Do we ever escape from the fascination of a turban...?” (as cited in Gilmour, 1994, p. 65). The complex visuality of foreignness made the durbar concept appealing for performances, parades, posters, photography and advertising, as evidenced by the continued symbolic use of princely India even today (Richter, 2014).

It is ironic that this image of a timeless and exotic India was created in part by its colonials, who otherwise tended to focus their efforts on the imposition of modernization (Codell, 2014). Nevertheless, these exotic accouterments and the spectacle of the very foreign durbar pageantry, a trope referred to by John F. Kasson as “Oriental Orgasmic” (Kasson, 1978, p. 63), were adapted into the cultural fabric of the United States, Thus, the tradition of princely excess commodified by the British was retained when the durbars made their way to the US, while the underlying issues of imperial control were largely ignored.

3. India in America: durbars as otherness
While India has taken on multiple meanings to various audiences (Inden, 1986; Kaul, 2014; Lamont & Bates, 2007; MacKenzie, 1995), one particular aspect that appealed to Americans near the beginning of the twentieth century was the luxuriousness and sumptuousness of its culture. The processions of elaborately garbed and bejeweled princes and their extensive retinues in the durbars made for “one of the most spectacular events of all time” (Bottomore, 1995, p. 511).

Although not untouched by British imperialism, nor by its own imperialist practices (Native Americans, African slaves, and the Spanish-American War), the United States of America had a different trajectory of experience with foreign cultures. Its relatively homogeneous population underwent a major change at this time, due to millions of immigrants arriving from Europe. In 1850, the foreign-born population of the US stood at 9.7%. In the decades following 1920, the percentage of foreign-born fluctuated between 13 and 15 percent of the population. Of these, the percentage of arrivals from Europe and North America constituted, in the period 1890 to 1920, between 93.9 and 97.5 percent of the foreign-born (Gibson & Lennon, 1999). In just the New York City area, particularly relevant to Luna Park patronage, the immigrant population exploded at this time (Kasson, 1978, p. 39). While they may have come from foreign countries, the immigrants were overwhelmingly white and shared many traditional American values. This was in decided contrast to the portrayal of India during this period in American media.

Michael R. Olneck speaks of the “social superiority” of American culture and the “symbolic delegitimization of collective ethnic identity” of foreign cultures (Olneck, 1989, pp. 400–401) that were inherent in Americanization efforts by government and educational institutions. Mass culture is often overlooked as part of this “toolbox” for social integration, but for immigrants and others, one of the ways a certain level of comfort and assimilation could be created was through a contrast with a more “foreign” ethnic identity, a reinforcement of cultural boundary delineation. Growing industrialization resulted in a paltry but new spectrum of worker’s rights, providing opportunity for the growth of leisure activities. Stereoviews, amusement parks, and the circus all could fill the leisure time newly available to American workers from a variety of backgrounds.

The durbar, and India in general, played to the attention of the American masses—spectacle at its most excessive, a marvel of costumes, elephants and unfamiliar exotica. American re-inventions celebrated princely India as entertainment at a time when such princes and their states were losing everything, other than symbolic power, to the British. Coming on the heels of various ethnological
displays, world’s expositions and fairs, as well as sideshows and freak shows, the durbars became a means to present the exotic in terms of a particular place (India). A new public culture at this time accompanied the demographic changes that were occurring. Stephen F. Mills, analyzing this phenomenon in terms of the 1893 World Columbia Exhibition, stated that such stereotypes served as a substitute for collective “memory triggers” when the personal experience of other cultures did not exist (Mills, 1996, p. 256). Thus, we have the re-invention of the durbars supporting this artificially created American memory of invented Indian princely tradition.

Toward the development of a collective American cultural identity faced with an increasingly diverse population, India and South Asia occupied a niche as a representation of the exotic qualities of the unfamiliar and the “uncivilized,” in contrast to the US. Whether this was orientalist, or racist, or whether it represents the height of spectacle, as others have claimed (Codell, 2012; Davis, 1993), remains an issue for further consideration. Even though the United States and India were beyond the usual colonial binary, such imagery was available to interject itself into popular entertainment. How one particular incident of the British Empire and India, the 1903 Delhi durbars, took its place in American culture over a period of 30 years, forms an interesting study of the appeal of the foreign exotic in the American imaginary.

Americans took the symbols of the durbars without its substance, the pageantry without the underlying power and control issues. While its significance was deeply rooted in British consciousness, the durbars held little strategic, political, or economic meaning for Americans. It was outrageously exotic, presenting “outward magnificence” according to Charles Allen (2000, p. 231). In the sense that defining India as “oriental” renders it inferior (Said, 1978), the reception of the durbars in America did connote an imperialist framework. Since, however, there was no direct power relationship between the two countries, the orientalist description can be viewed as symbolic or stereotypical, rather than embedded with physical force. Americans used the pageantry of the durbars for their own institutions that relied on extravagance, particularly the overlapping aspects of photography, amusement parks, and circus parades. This interwoven idea of spectacle and foreignness seems to be a construct created in the US from the perception of Indian society as a civilization ruled by princes, rather than by civil servants or the British monarchy.

The American experience focused on the exotic spectacles that conformed to existing American visual institutions and cultural phenomena. As the British adapted Indian rituals for their own purposes, the Americans further distanced themselves from the durbars’ original raison d’être, imbuing the various durbars’ incarnations in the US with little inherent meaning beyond the visual and performative. This integrated the durbars into the fabric of American popular entertainment traditions, reconstituting its image with little regard for its original cultural context. Although the apparent extravagance of the Indian princes had been specified by representatives of the British crown, Americans saw little beyond its ceremonial excesses.

4. Stereoviews: durbars as visual history
A variety of American companies produced photographs for stereoscopes, known alternatively as stereoviews, stereographs, stereograms, or stereograph cards. From beginnings in the 1850s and 1860s, they reached the height of their recording of special events around the transition to the twentieth century (Plunkett, 2008), coincident with the 1903 Delhi durbars. They churned out stereoviews by the millions (Babbitts, 2004; Darrah, 1964, 1977; Natale, 2012). Competitive sales techniques drove many of the smaller firms out of business, leaving two major companies, Underwood & Underwood and Keystone View Company, in control of much of the market. Stereoviews remained more prevalent in the US for a longer period of time than in Europe, largely due to the marketing procedures developed by the two brothers who founded Underwood & Underwood. A popular form of education and entertainment, inexpensive cards with two adjacent, slightly shifted photographs of the same scene created a three-dimensional effect when viewed through a specially designed instrument, creating a pseudo-immersive experience (Osborne, 1909, pp. 72–79).
In its heyday, stereography was an important technology for the distribution of information about the world, and a virtual experience of it, a “visual understanding” (Babbitts, 2004, p. 128) that was the new standard for being modern and educated. According to Simone Natale, “The stereoscope became the dominant visual mode in which images of distant places and journeys were recollected or imagined” (Natale, 2012, p. 455). In the case of the durbar, both major companies produced sets of stereoviews of the 1903 durbar, coming as it did at virtually the apex of the popularity of stereoscopy (Figure 2).

The transfer of imagery of the 1903 durbar to the US was relatively straight-forward, since the stereoview companies sent photographers to this event to capture it for their customers. Underwood & Underwood alone sent four photographers, including the famous James Ricalton, a prolific photographer and author. Ricalton’s skills were particularly suited to the stereoview medium (Hevia, 2009; Lucas, 1990; Rann, 1907), and he also produced a book to accompany his series of photographs of India. This set of images appeared to pass into the American cultural arena with little adaptation, but this idea needs reconsideration.

While photographs of the 1903 durbar were prevalent in various forms and formats (Allen, 2000; Bottomore, 1995; Codell, 2012; Dewan, 2012), the stereoviews created their own context in which the durbar was a part of the larger sense of exotic otherness that India presented to the American public. The stereoscope companies moderated the experience the cards created through the descriptions included on the backs of the cards, in the case of both major companies. These descriptions were embedded with common attitudes of the period regarding foreign countries, and were far from neutral in their depictions of India and the durbar.

These descriptions printed on the back of the stereoviews are as telling as the photographs themselves with regard to the attitudes conveyed. On the reverse of an Underwood & Underwood view of the durbar procession, Number 3468, the card states:

Gold, silver and jewels you see now [sic] actually used as lavishly as in old fairy tales or the stories of the Arabian Nights. Those elephant blankets are stiff and heavy with embroideries of gold; the dangling pendants worn by that nearest elephant are of silver beautiful enough for a ballroom... These are state equipages of the Maharajahs (native princes), whose wealth is almost beyond counting ...

While the end of this statement mentions the modernizing policies of the maharajahs, the major focus of this American interpretation is their resplendent wealth (Figure 3). This is echoed in the description of a related scene by the Keystone View Company. Their card, V12554, states, “The jewels worn by a single one of these Maharajahs themselves are in many cases worth hundreds of thousands or even millions of dollars.” Again, the emphasis on extravagance and immeasurable wealth.
James Ricalton’s *India Through the Stereoscope: A Journey Through Hindustan*, a publication for Underwood & Underwood to accompany its set of photographs of India, contains pronouncements that reinforce the sentiments expressed on the backs of the cards. With specific reference to the durbar, these include such statements as, “Pageantry and spectacular pomp have been favorites of the oriental mind from time immemorial” (Ricalton, 1907, pp. 264–265) and “Natives give little heed to a protest from their own kind; but they honor the ‘big-stick’ admonitions of a European” (Ricalton, 1907, p. 269).

According to Babbitts, “For the most part, their [the photographers sent to foreign countries] intention was not to challenge prevailing stereotypes but to find ever more unusual examples of national traits and characteristics that other travelers and cultural explorers had identified in their writings” (Babbitts, 2004, p. 135). Thus, cultural stereotypes of foreignness were reinforced and reproduced in the realization of an “imagined Other” (Edwards, 2008, p. 240) through, in this case, the immersive experience with “authentic” photographs.

Harvey Green has written that stereoviews satisfied a need for “a special sort of edited visual knowledge” (Green, 1979, p. 114), a part of the American doctrine of educational advancement and related social integration that could be acquired without the inconveniences and expenses of travel. This hyper-visual durbar stereoview experience was special in that it was created by commercial interests in a manner that would appeal sufficiently to its customers in order to sell its products.

Without the imperial framework that provided meaning in both Britain and India, it can be argued that the durbar was transmuted into an ahistorical spectacle in America, a “created world” defined as “selective renderings with the appearance of faithful reproduction” (Green, 1979, p. 114). This constructed view of India could be used in the creation of an exotic other, in contrast to a shared set of modern cultural values that constituted the American identity. However, shortly after the third durbar, around 1912, Underwood & Underwood moved away from the stereoview business, selling its stock to the Keystone View Company, which continued to reproduce these views until about 1938 (Darrah, 1964, p. 198), decreasing their role in the definition of an American public identity.

5. Luna Park postcards: durbars as amusement

Luna Park was an enormously popular amusement park that opened in the summer of 1903 in Coney Island, drawing visitors from throughout New York City and beyond, at one point 142,000 on a single day (Ashby, 2006, p. 137). The park expanded in 1904, adding new sections, including a show based on the Delhi durbars, touted as an orientalist fantasy. The *New York Times* review of the opening of the redesigned park, 15 May 1904, begins with a focus on the Delhi durbar:
Sixteen of the newly acquired acres of land in Luna Park were set aside for the reproduction of the glittering Durbar of Delhi. There was the Vice Royal palace in the city that had been reproduced in miniature, and a pageant of Oriental splendor was presented. There were gilded chariots and prancing horses, and trained elephants and dancing girls, regiments of soldiers, and an astonishing number of real Eastern people and animals in gay and stately trappings. The magnificence of the scene was such as to make those who witnessed it imagine they were in a genuine Oriental city. In fact, there was a charm about the streets of Delhi that kept the people spellbound until the exhibition ended. Five thousand people at a time saw this remarkable show, and then went back to see it a second time.

The Great Durbar at Delhi show at the amusement park provided a parade of 300 people representing the princes of India and their retinues in colorful costumes, riding elephants, camels, and horses (Immerso, 2002, pp. 71–73; Thompson, 1908). The durbar was the highlight of Luna Park for the press, but turned out to be quite expensive to produce, prompting its sale to the circus after a relatively short tenure (Figure 4).

Coney Island, in which Luna Park was just one section, is still famous (or possibly infamous) as a site of amusement, its diversity affecting its reputation and character across decades. In its heyday, with its long stretch of beach, thrilling rides, outrageous architecture, mechanical marvels, nightly illuminations, and fast food, it served as a magnet for working people, a mecca for pleasure-seekers. For Kasson (1978), Coney Island symbolized the changing nature of American society, from a homogeneous set of elite values to the mass-attractive amusements that were to occupy Americans for the coming decades, and even now can be found in such productions as reality television or even Las Vegas, rather than in the corporate gentility of Epcot and other Disney theme parks. At the turn of the last century, however, according to Kasson, amusement parks were the greatest symbols of this social change. The concept of orientalist extravagance was built into the architecture of Luna Park, where people of various backgrounds could interact. The addition of durbar-related shows and activities further enhanced the exotic qualities of this entertainment mélange.

Postcards, like stereoviews, became another commercial aspect of the burgeoning leisure industries that accompanied the rise of mass entertainment and culture (Geary & Webb, 1998; Kasson, 1978, pp. 40–41; Rydell & Kroes, 2005, p. 83). Also like stereoviews, this mechanization of visuality became a hallmark of modernization, a recurring motif in the developing portrait of America. However, postcards documented experiential meanings unlike those tied to stereoviews, since not only were they treasured as souvenirs, but postcards such as those of Luna Park could be used as indicators of an individual’s participation in the latest popular “social media” trends, the Facebook of the previous century, another gauge of Americanness. Postcards sent from Coney Island were a major phenomenon, with 250,000 mailed during a single weekend (Immerso, 2002).
This postcard view of the architecture of Luna Park provides an example of how handily the durbar concept fulfilled this visual pleasure-seeking that was manipulated to create an image of a foreign fantasy (Figure 5). It shows vaulted arcades on two sides, like the durbar amphitheater itself. These were also similar to aspects of other Mughal-style arched buildings such as the Red Fort, and onion-shaped domes such as those on the Jama Masjid, both prominent architectural features of Delhi. However, the central building, impressive as it is, appears to be a copy of a gopura, a tower that is a common feature of Hindu temples in southern India, rather than in the north, where Delhi is located. The addition of such an ornate structure to both the park and the postcard serves to increase the “oriental” impression of the site; its historical and geographical inauthenticity would probably not have been noticed by those in attendance.

It is obvious that the presentation of the durbar as public amusement took some liberties with the realities of the processions in Delhi. This was irrelevant to the visitors, who were taking the opportunity to escape from their lives, however briefly. In this sense the park’s vision of the durbar both reflected and rejected the social constructs of the US and its population. According to LeRoy Ashby, Luna Park and other similar ventures reflected “the prejudices that shaped the outside society... But, while amusement parks reinforced some social divisions, they helped dissolve others, forging new communities in which strangers mingled, however, briefly, in the pursuit of common pleasure ...” (Ashby, 2006, p. 140).

Perhaps the initial success of this durbar brought it additional attention by circus entrepreneurs. It was determined that about 10 million people paid admission to Luna Park in 1904, when this production was added to the park (Weinstein, 1992, p. 143). This was the same year as the St. Louis World’s Fair, which contained a much less specific Mysterious Asia section, with a replica of the Taj Mahal and a facsimile of the streets of Delhi, sans durbar, the latest in a continuing series of fairs and expositions that presented semblances of foreign cultures, including India.

Ownership restructuring, two world wars, and a changing environment for public entertainment created a slow decline in attendance for Coney Island and its Luna Park, which closed finally in the 1940s, hastened by spectacular fires on the grounds that destroyed its most iconic structures. The Luna Park durbar feature was transferred to the Great Floto Shows circus early on, including animals and costumes (Billboard, 1904, December 31, pp. 17–19) to continue the interaction with the theme in a different context, reinforcing the connections between the various components of mass culture, and the ease with which visual and performative elements could be transferred and reintroduced in different entertainment formats.
6. Circus parade posters: durbars as spectacle
American circus entrepreneurs were certainly familiar with the potential of the durbar. The physical legacy of Luna Park’s durbar paraphernalia and the very competitive entertainment environment ensured that the durbar concept would have been embraced by circuses, particularly as there was always a need to find a context for their elephants. The version of the durbars presented to the American public by circuses bore even less resemblance to the original events than those re-enacted in Luna Park. It was almost like that childhood game of telephone, when a message is repeated so often that each iteration loses more of its original meaning, in this case moving conceptually further from its roots in India. However, the circus parade, a special feature of the American circus (Springhall, 2008), bore at least a superficial resemblance to the durbar itself.

The circus in America, because of its annual cycles through the country, was dependent on novelty and the presentation of the exotic to American communities. On circus day, the day the circus came to town, the activities of normal daily life were suspended so people could vicariously experience the unusual, exploiting the concept of otherness. Historically, the circus had been producing parades similar to the durbars since the early 1880s, at that time building upon the orientalist poem Lalla Rookh, written in 1817 by Thomas Moore. After the decline of the ethnographic-style show at the end of the nineteenth century, the circus moved to greater emphasis on thematic spectacles. It was at this time that the greatest number of circuses were in circulation across America (Davis, 2002, p. 7). Besides the “Luna Park leftovers” circus show, another iteration of the durbar appeared in the Barnum & Bailey circus in 1904 and again in 1905, which included a nod to the British monarchy, dancing girls, and the Prince of Siam in its format (Albrecht, 2014, p. 52).

Also in 1904, the Ringling Brothers circus (before its merger with the Barnum & Bailey circus) advertised its “Big Million Dollar Free Street Show and Big New Parade” that contained an “oriental section” featuring men wearing turbans atop a procession of caparisoned elephants (Figure 6). However, unlike the durbars in Delhi, the foreground of its advertising poster features women in flowing harem-style clothing atop some of the elephants, as well as leading the parade, and men on horseback dressed as medieval knights. This mixture of cultural elements began to be more of a feature of the circus at this time, as it moved into a period of little attention to authenticity, and rather greater attention to spectacle and pageantry (Stambler & Posey, 2015).

Circuses adopted parades as a form of free advertising, marching through towns and cities prior to performances. Since elephants were a major feature of the circus and its parades, any excuse to include them in a year’s theme was explored. In 1909, a durbar-like procession was still part of a poster advertising the Barnum & Bailey circus, but at this time we see only the rear of the elephants moving away from the viewer, while the more substantive view is of a circus bandwagon pulled by
teams of horses (Figure 7). The New York Clipper (a local entertainment publication) of 10 February 1912 reported that, along with Annie Oakley, even the Young Buffalo Wild West Show would have a durbar feature, created by “special emissaries, who were sent to India to study the [1911] Durbar in all its glory” and who would “reproduce that great inaugural procession in all its splendor and grandeur.”

Because this durbar idea was adapted for its visual foreign qualities and had little tradition behind it in America, it was a much more fluid concept, so the circus could integrate it with other elements without a sense of doing a disservice to its meaning. Thus, the durbar resurfaced in 1933, repeated in 1934 and 1935, in the Ringling Bros. and Barnum & Bailey Combined Circus, as in the poster above (Figure 8), 22 years after the last British-created durbar in India. In 1937, to create novelty, the same basic show was retitled “India.” In 1938, it morphed into “Nepal,” again not much changed. Thus, the original impetus for this pageantry slowly disappeared, lost ultimately to the economics of circus conceptual and costume recycling.
A “fluff” review in the Pittsburgh Post-Gazette by Harvey Gaul appearing on July 4, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette provides a sense of the absence of historical continuity and authenticity by this time.

Well, this season’s show is somewhat different, it opens with a Durbar.

What’s a Durbar?

Oh, stop now. You know what a crow-bar is, (a place where they keep “Old Crow”) and you know a speak-easy-bar when you see one? And a handle-bar? Then put them all together and you have a Durbar. It has something to do with India, only there’s no Mahatma Gandhi. Maybe he was dieting again. (p. 15)

India was thus, at this later date, reduced to a cliché of foreignness. Janet Davis attributes this use of India by the circus as part of an anti-modernist movement and as a counterbalance to increasing industrialization (Davis, 2002, p. 219). Unlike the later “Raj Revival” in Britain, the use of the Delhi durbar in 1930s America did not recall romanticized memories of empire. Rather, it was simply an excuse for an extravaganza, a visual convention to present what the circus did best—elaborately caparisoned elephants, “natives” in turbans and seemingly endless processions—a thematic convenience that bore a strong visual resemblance to the inspirational durbars. It would be interesting to determine how even the idea of the Delhi Durbars would have occurred to the circus designers so many years after its introduction to American culture, but no specific evidence has yet been found.

The adaptation of durbar visuality to the American context appears to have been a pretext for the circus to continue its orientalist approach to street parades and spectacles. For example, the 1914 Wizard Prince of Arabia poster (Figure 9) resembles photographs of the durbars almost as much as some posters that advertised the circus durbar spectacles themselves (Figure 10). Given the economics of the circus, it was necessary to re-use its performers, animals, costumes, etc. in a continuous stream of spectacle that implied novelty and foreignness while incurring little new cost. At the height of its popularity, the circus “helped consolidate the nation’s identity as a modern industrial society” (Davis, 2002, p. 10), in contrast to the acts it presented that played to the entertainment of its audiences through the inclusion of its foreign and pseudo-foreign orientalist acts.

Figure 9. Strobridge Lithograph Company, Barnum & Bailey: The Wizard Prince of Arabia, 1914, The John and Mable Ringling Museum of Art, ht2000329.
7. Conclusion
While the Delhi durbars in general, and the 1903 event in particular, were not necessarily precipitating events in the depiction of India as exotic foreignness, their commodification in various forms of American popular culture contributed to its overall orientalist characterization. Putting the three contexts together—stereoviews, Luna Park, and circuses—provides a chronological view of the durbar’s increasing inauthenticity in America. In each of these examples, American entrepreneurs attempted to create, for their American public, experiences of the Delhi durbar that addressed the visual and performative aspects of its splendors and spectacle, reinforcing a “paradigm of visual knowledge” (Babbitts, 2004, p. 127) with reference to a princely India. Meanings accrued to these events based on images that focused on their extravagance and difference, paying little attention to underlying colonial narratives and power relationships.

Although the concept of empire was the central theme of the actual event, the various entertainment formats that used the durbars in the US relied on their value as sumptuous sparkle and excess. They brought orientalist images of princely India that could ignore the realities of both South Asian and British politics. In the United States, it was Indian royalty (in the form of rajahs and nawabs, a Muslim princely title, and their trappings), rather than British royalty, that was the visual focus. This dichotomy of timeless India vs. modern America contributed toward a symbolic boundary of national difference that helped define a collective American cultural identity. As Edward Said stated, “no identity can ever exist by itself and without an array of opposites…” (Said, 1994, p. 60).

The term “culture industry” was not coined until after the durbars were re-invented in America. However, its meaning is that popular culture produces and reproduces perceptions that people assume have been generated by their experiences of the world, rather than through commercial fabrication. This term, therefore, can be applied to the American interaction with the 1903 Delhi durbar, in which impressions of India were commodified through a deliberate emphasis on extravagance in the various visual formats that re-used this event for mass entertainment. Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, who coined this term, wrote of “ready-made clichés, to be used here and there as desired and always completely defined by the purpose they serve within the schema” (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002, p. 98). The durbar served the commercial purposes of those who adapted it for mass entertainment, with underlying reverberations of defining Americanness in comparison to foreignness.
Thus, the image of India as exotic otherness was perpetuated by the confluence of three of the major commercial visual formats of the time, in which the durbar was packaged and re-packaged for the American public. While the stereoviews were fairly prevalent throughout the US, Luna Park was primarily an urban venue, in contrast to the circuses that traveled throughout the US, including rural areas. Though their geographic reach varied, each penetrated American mass culture in a way that used the durbar concept to define the idea of India and its oppositional foreignness.

The three major forms of mass entertainment that produced the visual legacies considered here—stereoviews, an amusement park, and the circus—began to decline in popularity in the 1920s and 1930s with the rise of the film industry and, somewhat later, the development of home television. As Kasson stated, the exotic other lost its power to astound audiences (Kasson, 1978, p. 112). Thus, we are left with just a few historical resonances and remembrances of the durbar’s exotic otherness created for American mass entertainment as the country moved into the twentieth century. The legacy of its imperial character is in the princely extravagance of its invented traditions. These imaginative iterations of the 1903 event, through their visual experiences embedded with stereotypical attitudes toward an orientalist foreignness, contributed to delineating the contrasting narrative of modern American identity.

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