

Introduction

To be accounted for, objects have to enter into accounts.

—Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social*

At the base of the footpath up to the great pilgrimage temple of Venkateshvara, the god on the mountain in Tirumala-Tirupati, Andhra Pradesh, a four-foot cement image of a devotee lies prostrate, with arms stretched out in *pranam* (greeting) above his head toward the mountain. His body is covered with turmeric and vermilion powders (*pasupu-kumkum*) and encircled with a garland of yellow marigolds. To his right side are three much smaller images similarly covered with *pasupu-kumkum*, whose features are not as distinguishable as those of the larger image (Figures I.1 and I.2). I met this figure when I first walked up the mountain on the 3,350-step cement footpath several years after having regularly taken a bus uphill. This early morning I was accompanied by Peta Srinivasulu Reddy, an anthropologist from a local university, who seemed intent on running up the mountain and who didn't stop with me when I paused to photograph the image. My first impulse was to lie down next to the *pasupu-kumkum*-covered image. For those few minutes there were no other pilgrims in the vicinity, but when I returned later in the week, I saw that male pilgrims did just this—prostrated themselves next to the image with its same body pose, arms extended above their heads. Women, on the other hand, touched the feet of the image and placed some flower petals on it or sprinkled it with a little *pasupu-kumkum*.

As we continued walking up the footpath after my encounter with the image, Srinivasulu identified it as a Maladasari, a cobbler from a formerly untouchable community of the same name. It is said that in



Figure I.1. Maladasari, base of footpath up to Tirumala, site of temple of Shri Venkateshvara. Photo by the author.

earlier days he had provided the god on the mountain a new pair of *chappals* (sandals) every day. But he had not been permitted into the temple due to his low caste status, so he used to prostrate himself at the foot of the mountain where he now lies, as close to the god as he



Figure I.2. Pilgrim prostrating next to the Maladasari. Photo by the author.

could physically get. However, Srinivasulu continued, Venkateshvara was so impressed with the Maladasari's devotion that he came downhill to meet him. As I sat on the steps next to the image several days later and observed pilgrims' interactions with the figure, I asked several pilgrims who he was. None of them knew, only that he was a devotee like themselves. Several suggested I ask the priest in the nearby Pada Mandapam (lit., foot pavilion) temple that enshrines Venkateshvara's footprints as a pair of cement feet.¹ The priest affirmed that the image was a cobbler devotee who had turned to stone when he wasn't allowed uphill to visit the god. The priest did not know the history of the image but described numerous disputes about whether the image of the Maladasari should be allowed to be there at all, in such a prominent position. However, he recounted, each time someone tried to remove the image, a catastrophe would strike that person or his family.

1. Devotees at this temple circumambulate the god's feet with a pair of oversized brass chappals (provided by the temple) atop their heads.

Meeting this Maladasari was one encounter that started my thinking about the agency of objects in India—materials that have an effect,² that cause something to happen that may be beyond what a human creator of that material intended. I had felt compelled to respond to the figure, to want to lie down next to it, before I had seen anyone else do so. Other pilgrims too were drawn to the figure—whom they could only generically identify as a devotee—in a similar way. Either they were imitating other pilgrims prostrating themselves or touching its feet, or they knew the appropriate bodily response from other temple sites where similar, but much smaller, figures are engraved in courtyard stone flooring. Alternatively, like me, they may have been compelled by the figure itself—whose ritual significance was created through the application of pasupu-kumkum, themselves agentive materials (as we will see in subsequent chapters). Several elements of encounters with the Maladasari are noteworthy: the history of human intention of the person(s) who created the image is lost, the identity of the figure himself is not widely known (and contested by some of those who do “know”), and the material figure has been left to create its own effect without intervention of any ritual specialist. The agency of the Maladasari is created in part by an “assemblage” of materials (Deleuze and Guattari 1987; Bennett 2010, 4–5, 23–24):³ its physical location at the base of a pilgrimage footpath, pasupu-kumkum applied to the gray cement—causing it to glow—the marigold garland encircling the image, and other human bodies responding to it.

2. I have chosen to use the words “material” or “materiality” rather than “things,” even though many materiality scholars use the latter when they mean to refer to materiality that exceeds human agency. (See, for example, Morgan 2020; Brown 2003; Houtman and Meyer 2012.) Houtman and Meyer write, “We invoke the term *things* . . . because it signals indeterminacy—something that cannot be clearly circumscribed and that creates some degree of nervousness or anxiety” (2012, 16). However, for many English speakers “things” carries resonances of materials that are and can be manipulated by humans, in which contexts humans are the primary agents rather than the materiality; thus I prefer “material” and “materiality.”

3. Drawing on Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987), Jane Bennett characterizes an assemblage as an “an ad hoc grouping, a collectivity whose origins are historical and circumstantial, though its contingent status says nothing about its efficacy, which can be quite strong, . . . [whose] power is not equally distributed across the assemblage, . . . [and which is] made up of many types of actants: humans and nonhumans” (2005, 445n2).

Indian cultures are replete with examples of materials that are assumed to cause things to happen or to prevent them from happening, which both create and reflect an indigenous theory of the agency of materiality.⁴ Specified gemstones, set in rings, deflect the negative forces of particular planets (*grahas*, those planetary bodies that, literally, grab) (Shukla 2008, 140–43) or may grant their wearers prosperity and auspiciousness or bring healing (Cerulli and Guenzi 2016). Black kohl markings on the soles of babies’ feet or on the sides of their foreheads deflect the evil eye; similarly, amulets may deflect the evil eye but also transform relationships and physical environments (Flueckiger 2006). Rice-flour designs (Tamil, *kolams*; Telugu, *muggus*) drawn every morning by South Indian female householders (or a woman working in their houses) in front of entryways protect the home from the evil eye and invite the goddess Lakshmi to come in (Nagarajan 2019). Many Chhattisgarhi female householders light clay oil lamps (*diyas*) and set them outside doorways at dusk to invite Lakshmi to enter and protect their homes. This daily ritual is not usually accompanied by a discursive act such as prayer or a setting of intention; rather, the lighted *diyas* themselves are assumed to “do the work.” Glass bangles, quite literally in the Telugu expression, “make a bride” (*PELLI KUTURUNI CHEYYADAM*) and are broken to “make a widow.” The very earth one lives on, landscapes, and the water one drinks affect the personhood of those dwelling in those places (Daniel 1987; Ramanujan 1999).

Material traditions in India emphasize the agency (ability to act, to have an effect) of material itself—material acts—without dependence on human intervention in causing the assumed effects (although, of course, human bodies may be needed to produce or carry the materials). While materialities shape the daily lives and ritual performances of Hindu practitioners—and they may agree that these materialities have agency—not all of them may agree on what materials are worthy of serious study. For example, while many South Indian Hindu women consider the creation of *kolams* every morning in front of the entrances of their homes to be an activity as significant to the well-being of their homes as their daily worship of deities in their domestic shrines, some male Sanskrit scholars may not think *kolams* (or ornaments, or food selection for particular

4. Several of these material agents, such as amulets and coconuts, cross religious boundaries. Their very materiality enables boundary crossing in ways that theological discourse does not (Flueckiger 2006, chapter 5; Raj and Dempsey 2015).

festivals) to be as worthy of scholarly consideration as the textual traditions in which they are experts. Until relatively recently, religious studies scholars in the Western academy have followed suit in marginalizing many everyday materialities that shape Hindu worlds (Narayanan 2000).

Over the last two decades, there has been a renewed intellectual energy in religious studies (including South Asian religions) around visual and material culture to counter the historically dominant textual/discursive focus in the discipline.⁵ Some religious studies scholars have explicitly situated their studies of materiality as a pushback against post-Enlightenment, Protestant devaluation of materiality that asserts the primacy of the nonmaterial and belief over body, material, and ritual (Vasquez 2011; Houtman and Meyer 2012; Pintchman and Dempsey 2015). However, in their turn to materiality, many of these same scholars have focused on human agency in relationship to materiality: what humans do with materials and the ways human actions give objects their significance (Feld and Basso 1996; Houben 2007). Or they emphasize what materiality and visual culture reflect about humans, their identities, and/or their theologies (Elias 2012; McDannel 1998; Morgan 2005 and 2010a; Shukla 2008; Tarlo 1996; Vasquez 2011). Janet Hoskins calls objects “a metaphor for the self” (1998, 3). S. Brent Plate narrates human engagement, over centuries, with five everyday classes of material objects—stones, incense, drums, crosses, and bread—and how they are “put to use in highly *symbolic*, sacred ways” (2014, 4; my emphasis). In line with Arjun Appadurai’s *The Social Life of Things* (1986), Richard Davis’s *Lives of Indian Images* (1997) constructs historical biographies of select images of deities as they are acted upon by human communities. While these person-centered and historical approaches do not preclude the possibilities of material agency, the emphases remain on what humans have done with and how they have experienced objects.

One subset of materiality studies focuses specifically on visual culture—materials that are seen and meant to be seen by humans. David Morgan argues that visual images are agentive, or act, when “they touch or move us [and] *when we have reason to care about them*. . . . In other words, images move us because of our interest in what we take them to portray” (2018, 56; my emphasis). While Morgan identifies human and

5. One indication of the increasing focus in religious studies on materiality was the establishment in 2005 of the journal *Material Religion: The Journal of Objects, Art and Belief*.

nonhuman networks behind an image (which he calls a “focal point” that obscures these networks), his focus remains on the impact on humans of visual images about which humans “care.”

In the study of Indian religions, the visual gaze is often identified as *darshan*, specifically darshan of consecrated images of deities (*murtis*, *vigrahams*), in which the gaze has been assumed to be mutual, between deity and devotee: “to see and be seen” (Eck 1998).⁶ Readers familiar with Hindu traditions may wonder at the absence in this book of discussion of darshan and the example of agentive materiality of murtis.⁷ I have not included analyses of material deities because they are a particular kind of materiality, invested with a theology, about which much has been written both within and outside of the study of Hinduism (Babb 1981; Waghorne et al. 1996; Eck 1998; Cort 2012; Pintchman and Dempsey 2015; Flueckiger 2015). Nevertheless, the agency of murtis contributes to an indigenous theory of materiality and helps us to recognize the potential agency of other forms of materiality in India. In Indian cultures, a stone is often not just an inert stone but may have had a past life or may have the potential to become “something else,” including an enlivened deity (Gold 2008; Shulman and K. Vimala 2008).⁸ Other scholarship on visual culture in India includes, among others, foci on print culture, such as religious comic books (McClain 2009) and religious calendar art (Jain 2007; Pinney 2004), photography (Pinney 2008), and recently proliferating oversized, non-consecrated (that is, not actively worshiped) cement images of deities such as Hanuman and Shiva (Jain 2016; Lutgendorf 1994).

While the materials analyzed in this book are, of course, capable of being seen, my analyses focus less on the visual nature of the materials than on their presence. The cement Ravanans discussed in chapter 5 are seen but often not noticed outside of the festival of Dussehra; even during

6. Based on an ethnographic study of Caitanya Vaishnava communities, Anandi Silva Knuppel’s 2019 dissertation argues that darshan between deity (image) and devotee encompasses more than the visual gaze. It can include a wide range of devotional practices involving the body and multiple simultaneously engaged senses.

7. Similarly, I am not directly addressing the human body as a distinct material in the range of materialities analyzed in this book, although bodies carry ornaments, physical guising, and turmeric, and may be part of the assemblage of other materials.

8. See, for example, the story of Ahalya (found in several *puranas* and the Ramayana), who was cursed by her husband, the seer Gautama, to become a stone when he suspected her of infidelity. She was brought back to her human form only when Rama’s divine feet stepped on that same stone.

the festival, they are not objects of ritual darshan per se. South Indian wedding pendants (*talis*; chapter 1) explicitly should not be seen and are tucked underneath a woman's clothing, pulled out only at certain ritual moments.⁹ While the application of turmeric and vermilion powder on a human body or material may cause their features to stand out visually, these powders or pastes work primarily through their material presence rather than visually. (See chapter 3.)

New materialists such as Jane Bennett (2010) and Bruno Latour (2005) critique the human-centric focus so common in materiality studies, including approaches of visual culture studies in which objects are subordinated to humans who may interact with them. Christopher Pinney aims a critique directly at the “social life of things” approach: “The fate of objects in the Appadurai . . . accounts is always to live out the social life of men, or to become entangled in the webs of culture whose ability to refigure the object simultaneously inscribes culture's ability to translate things into signs and the object's powerlessness as an artifactual [*sic*] trace. . . . Narratives of the social lives of things . . . reaffirm the agency of those humans they pass between” (2005, 259). What materials can tell us about human history and the humans who interact with them is, of course, important. However, these approaches often do not account for the agency of materiality itself and what materiality does that may go beyond human intention, agency, and discourse. While I assume a “distributed agency” (Bennett 2010) between humans and materials, this book shifts focus from human agents of materiality to the agency of materiality that affects humans and deities. I am looking less for the human-attributed meaning of materials than what they do, perform, create.

Consider the architectural system of *vastu* (lit., dwelling)—itself a theory of material agency—which is a lively topic of conversation among many middle- and upper-class Hindus in contemporary India and to which numerous popular periodicals dedicate advice columns and articles. According to the system of *vastu* (much like the Chinese system of

9. See Sarah Horton's analysis of hidden *hibutsu* Buddha images in Japan (2007, chapter 6). James Robson describes similarly hidden but agentive and enlivening “consecration certificates” that are sealed into the torso cavities of Chinese domestic statues (2016). Horton and Robson participated with me in the 2017 Association of Asian Studies presidential roundtable, organized by then-president Laurel Kendall, titled “The Magic of Things: A Conversation across Regions and Disciplines about Agentive Statues and Masks.”

feng shui), the orientation of a building, the directional orientation of its entry, and the placement of its contents—a bed or desk, or the placement of a kitchen or bathroom in relationship to the rest of the house—can affect the social and physical lives of those who live in that commercial or domestic building. When I was conducting fieldwork in the city of Hyderabad in 1994 and 1995, I lived for nine months in the student hostel on the grounds of the American Studies Research Center (ASRC) on the campus of Osmania University and in the following years returned for many shorter visits. Although the center’s library was world-renowned and visited by scholars from across Asia and Africa, it was in a precarious financial situation when it lost American government PL 480 funding in 1998.¹⁰ Rumors of funding cuts led the center’s director and governing board to try numerous schemes to bring in additional income (such as offering the space for academic conferences). At the same time, one immediate material response was to move and rebuild at a different place (opening in a different direction) the entrance to the library. Following the shifting prescriptions of specialists in vastu, the entrance was rebuilt at least three times in the late 1990s—prescriptions that ultimately failed, at least to keep the institution of the ASRC in its original configuration as an independent center housed on the grounds of Osmania University.

The ASRC’s entry reorientation is only one of many examples of public buildings renovated according to vastu prescriptions for “preventative health” or for healing of “troubles” in the activities conducted inside those buildings. In 2014, when the governments of the newly formed states of Telangana and Andhra Pradesh divided the secretariat building to be (temporarily) shared by both governments, new entryways on both sides were built according to vastu prescriptions in order to ensure the success of the respective governments—a matter of sufficient significance so as to appear in local newspapers. A vastu specialist told anthropologist Tulasi Srinivas that the flow of space in a home is equivalent to the flow of blood in a body and must be adjusted when the flow is blocked (Srinivas 2018, 53). Traditions of vastu assert the agency of architectural materiality, but the agency of specific architectural features is often not noticed (beyond

10. PL480 was a US government aid program that sold surplus American food commodities to countries needing the food, including India, who were able to pay in local currencies rather than the dollar. The American rupee funds in India supported a range of collaborations and exchanges between American and Indian institutions and libraries.

their aesthetics or utility) until the human lives encompassed by that materiality begin to go awry. Humans can manipulate materiality (walls, beds, desks), but in an Indian way of thinking it is the materiality that is the primary agent of *vastu*.

All the materialities analyzed in this book require human action at some point in their life cycles (humans creating or wearing the objects). However, I want to bring materiality to the center of our understanding of everyday Hindu worlds. I call on readers to *notice* materials and their capacity to become agents independent of human intention or activity. The human intention and identity behind the creation of the Maladasari has been lost, but the cement image glowing with turmeric continues to compel pilgrims to prostrate next to it. A woman's tattoo or wedding pendant continues to materially work—and make her auspicious—long after she is first tattooed or first puts on the tali.

Material Agency

I began this project with Indian ways of thinking about the agency of materiality, observing cues of indigenous discourse about and performance of material agency in my ethnographic research. I then turned to scholarship of Euro-American new materialisms, much of which has not yet entered into religious studies as a central analytic paradigm. This scholarship helped to give me more precise language for, and to identify the complexities of, what I have come to mean by the word “agency.”

The title of this book, *Material Acts*, plays off J. L. Austin's term “speech acts”—utterances that *do* something rather than simply convey information (1975), such as the pronouncement at many Christian weddings “I now pronounce you man and wife.” My assumption, shared with performance studies scholars (for example, Bauman 1984; Bell 1998; Taylor 2016) regarding ritual and narrative performance, is that material objects do not simply reflect preexisting ideologies and identities but that their performativity also *creates* identity, theology, transformation; they *do* something—material *acts*. I have found this linguistics-derived phrase to be generative of analytic frameworks for materiality, although I agree with many of the critiques of the “linguistic turn” of the 1960s–1980s in analyzing nonlinguistic phenomena. These semiotic foci assumed, quoting Christopher Pinney, that “the visual was essentially ‘translatable,’ capable of

an unravelling or decoding as a result of which ‘meaning’ would appear” (2006, 132). Christopher Tilley has warned, “Clearly linguistic analogies may serve to obscure as much as they may illuminate the nature and meanings of things as material forms” (2006, 23). “Artefacts perform active metaphorical work in the world that words cannot. They have their own form of communicative agency” (25). With the important caveat that material is not language, the assumption of the creativity of performance is shared between analyses of language and materiality.

Three scholars have been particularly influential in raising questions and providing language for the analyses of material agency in this book: Alfred Gell, Bruno Latour, and Jane Bennett. While each addresses a different scholarly literature and questions, they share an assertion of the agency of materiality as more than signs or reflections of social relations or cultural practices, as well as the importance of accounting for relationships and networks between different material and human agents.

In his discussion about the relationship between art objects and social agency, Gell defines agency as being “attributable to those persons (and things [as secondary agents] . . .) who/which are seen as initiating causal sequences of a particular type, that is, events caused *by acts of mind or will or intention*” (1998, 16; my emphasis). He asserts that nonhuman things “cannot, by definition have intentions” (17); they have effect only due to “physical laws.” Gell continues to build his argument: while material objects may have effect, they are only media of human agency and are therefore only “secondary agents . . . through which primary agents distribute their agency in the causal milieu, and thus render their agency effective” (20). These parameters of primary and secondary agency are not as solidified as they may first appear. Gell insists that by identifying objects to be secondary, he does not mean to imply they are less important. After all, primary (intentional) agents are dependent on secondary agents: “Objectification in artefact form is how social agency manifests and realizes itself, via the proliferation of fragments of ‘primary’ intentional agents in their ‘secondary’ artefactual forms” (20). Gell leaves open the possibility that while creation of many material forms depends on primary agents who may have specific intentions in relationship to these same materials, secondary agents may also create something beyond these intentions.

Bruno Latour, in *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (2005), pushes back against Gell’s assumption that agency requires intention:

The main reason why objects had no chance to play any role before was not only due to the definition of the social used by sociologists, but also to the very definition of actors and agencies most often chosen. If action is limited a priori to what “intentional,” “meaningful” humans do, it is hard to see how a hammer, a basket, [etc.] . . . could act. . . . By contrast if we stick to our decision to start from the controversies about actors and agencies, then *any thing* that does modify a state of affairs by making a difference is an actor. . . . Thus, the questions to ask about any agent are simply the following: Does it make a difference in the course of some other agent’s action or not? (71)

Here, Latour critiques a binary distinction between things and people, arguing that they are always implicated one with the other.

Political theorist Jane Bennett, in *Vibrant Matter* (2010), employs the term “distributed agency” to analyze a range of possible interactions between “vibrant things,” human and nonhuman—those things “with a certain effectivity of their own” (xvi). Her aspiration, she writes, “is to articulate a vibrant materiality that runs alongside and inside humans to see how analyses of political events might change if we gave the force of things more due” (viii). As I observed with the Maladasari, Bennett points out that material actants never act alone but rather in “assemblages.” She explains that an actant’s “efficacy or agency always depends on the collaboration, cooperation, or interactive interference of many bodies and forces.¹¹ A lot happens to the concept of agency once nonhuman things are figured less as social constructions and more as actors, and once humans themselves are assessed not as autonyms but as vital materialities” (21).

My working definition of “agency” is *the capacity of a subject to act, to cause an effect*. To assert that materials (often in “assemblages”) can be agents does not imply consciousness or will on the part of that material object; the very presence of a material object or structure, without will or intention, may have an effect on both other materialities and human subjects. Agency may be distributed between human and nonhuman

11. David Morgan calls these networks an “ecology of things” (2018, chapter 4). See also Latour 2005.

subjects, but human will or intention regarding the creation or use of a material does not limit or control what that material may create.

Ethnographic-Performative Methodologies

One purpose of this book is to extend the range of materialities brought into the account of religious studies, and, as Bennett writes, “to linger in those moments during which [we find ourselves] . . . fascinated by objects, taking them as clues to the material vitality that they share with them [vital materialists]” (2010, 17). Lingering among these materialities, Latour urges us to “make things talk”: “Once built, the wall of bricks does not utter a word—even though the group of workmen goes on talking and graffiti may proliferate on its surface. . . . This is why specific tricks have to be invented to *make them talk*, that is, to offer descriptions of themselves, to produce *scripts* of what they are making others—humans or nonhumans—do” (2005, 79).

But how to make them “talk”?

Methodologically, this project presented a challenge to me as an ethnographer used to depending primarily on verbal conversations and performed songs, narratives, and commentaries as primary evidence for analyses. I have not dropped altogether these discursive commentaries; rather, I have used them as cues for further material observation and performative analyses.¹² One goal of this book is to identify indigenous theories of material agency—my interlocutors do not need Gell, Latour, or Bennett to tell them that materials act. And so, I include (perhaps more than many materiality studies do) indigenous discursive commentaries about the materialities under consideration, as well as my own experiences of materiality in some ethnographic contexts. For example, I learned about the agency of ornaments by being admonished or praised by my friends for something I was doing with my own ornaments. However, the ways in which people spoke about different kinds of materials differed significantly—for example providing fragmental comments about ornaments

12. In his introduction, the editor of *Material Vernaculars*, Jason Baird Jackson, identifies a similar methodology shared by contributors to that volume: observing the relationships between materiality and indigenous personal and sacred narratives (2016, 4).

and longer commentary or narrative performances about Ravana but not his cement images. About turmeric-vermilion my interlocutors had little to say at all, but they were confident in their own actions incorporating them into rituals and their material effect.

The challenge was both to take into account human agency, intentions, and commentary about specific materials and to let the materials “speak” performatively to their own agency, beyond human intention.¹³ Christopher Pinney warns us, citing Carlo Ginzburg (1989, 35), not to read into the image what we have determined “by other means” (2005, 260). In this case he is critiquing interpretations of materiality (the object) as necessarily reflective or growing out of a particular historical moment, thus precluding possibilities for multiplicity and difference in their creative potential (264).¹⁴ I take Pinney’s warning a little differently: not to attribute to materiality what I may have learned *only* through other means such as narratives and indigenous commentary but also to analyze what materials create performatively, perhaps outside of human intention. The most significant material effect of the cement Ravana of Chhattisgarh, for example, is their creation of his literal, material presence in Chhattisgarhi landscapes in which the Ramayana protagonist Rama is (relatively) absent. The agency of these material Ravana exceeds discursive commentary and histories and cannot be tied down to particular Ramayana narratives and human intentions.

One strategy for observing how materials act is to place the materials in a performance studies analytic frame, which assumes that performance is emergent in each of its iterations, “always and only a living practice in the moment of its activation” (Taylor 2016, 7). Each material performance has the potential to create differently than the iteration before it. Material

13. Hillary Kaell has a similar goal, to account for human intention and independent material agency, in analyzing large roadside Christian crosses in rural Quebec: “In Quebec, *humans* act by enhancing a cross’s visibility so that *it* can act on other humans. . . . Yet human action and nonhuman prescription sometimes align imperfectly and despite caretakers’ efforts, things go awry. Wood breaks down, foliage grows erratically, and people still routinely fail to see the crosses or recognize them for what they are” (2017, 145).

14. Pinney quotes Siegfried Kracauer’s *History: The Last Things before the Last* (1969): “We tacitly assume that our knowledge of the moment at which an event emerges from the flow of time will help us account for its occurrence” (Pinney 2005, 263).

acts do not simply reflect preexisting ideologies, theologies, norms, or human intention; rather, the reiteration of their performances helps to both create ideologies and norms and potentially disrupt them (Butler 1990, 1997; Hollywood 2002). While performances may fail or contradict human intentions behind them, through a performance studies lens that looks for what *is* created, there is no failure (Flueckiger 2013b). Material acts may have unpredictable effects but not failed ones.¹⁵

Repertoire is another important facet of performance analyses. In the case of material acts, to place individual materialities in repertoires of similar and performatively related materials provides material commentary about the agency of their individual members. To identify different forms of male, female, and goddess guising in a South Indian goddess tradition as elements of a single performative repertoire, for example, helps us to recognize the creative potential of such material acts that may not be as easily discerned were only a single form of guising to be analyzed. This book also places several different material repertoires (ornaments, guising, turmeric-vermilion and other ritual materials, goddess-shrine architecture, and cement Ravanas) in relationship to one another. This inter-materiality is another mode of commentary about the ways in which material agency is performed in everyday Hindu worlds. The broad repertoire of different forms of materiality also highlights that while each form is agentive, it is agentive in a unique way. That is, not all materialities work in the same way. The deeply ethnographic approach of this book is, in part, to acknowledge and perform how specific materials are deeply embedded in human and other material worlds. The ethnographic details are also intended to provide bases for questions by the book's readers that may go beyond my analyses.

Five Sites of Material Acts

Material Acts analyzes five forms or sites of materiality from three field sites where I have conducted extensive fieldwork: the central Indian state

15. This assertion stands in contrast to J. L. Austin's identification of failed performatives (what he calls "misfirings")—failed speech acts that do not accomplish what their speakers intend—when the statement is not made by the "correct"/right person, to the right audience, under the right circumstances (Austin 1975, 14–19; Hollywood 2002).

of Chhattisgarh, the city of Hyderabad in the Deccan Plateau, and the South Indian pilgrimage town of Tirupati. I begin with two forms of materiality that are indigenously and explicitly articulated to be agentic: ornaments and material guising. I accept these articulations and performances to reflect an Indian theory of materiality, which I use as an analytic framework within which to identify the agency of other materials that human participants/observers may not discursively acknowledge—abundant and excessive ritual items, village-deity temple architecture, and cement images of Ravana, the antagonist of the Ramayana epic.

Indigenous articulation and assumptions about the agency of materiality is clearest in the case of ornaments, the focus of chapter 1. One Indian-language term for ornamentation, *alankara*, literally means “to make adequate,” privileging what the ornaments themselves do rather than the agency of persons who may give or wear them. Ornaments are protective; they make women auspicious; they create relationships; and in the case of tattoos they have agency beyond the demise of the human body that they ornament.

Chapter 2 analyzes the transformative potential of material guising (*vesham*) of both humans and the goddess in the context of a South Indian village goddess festival, Gangamma Jatara. Here, we see the importance of identifying a repertoire of different kinds of guising as a form of indigenous commentary on some of its elements about which there is little discourse. While the festival is best known for men taking female guise (*stri vesham*: saris, ornaments, breasts, and braids), women also identify the turmeric powder applied to the dark stone goddess’s face as *vesham*, and those with whom I spoke were explicit about its transformative power—that is, turmeric *vesham* makes a demanding (*ugra*) goddess satisfied (*shanta*). Taking this as a performative cue, I argue that *stri vesham* too has transformative possibilities, changing the nature of masculinity of those men donning the *vesham*.

In chapters 3, 4, and 5, we shift to materials about which human participants had less to say, directly, about material agency. Chapter 3 analyzes the proliferation of materiality in two ritual sites: a South Indian women’s vow ritual (Telugu, *mokku*) called Varalakshmi Puja and the festival of Gangamma Jatara. The explicit purpose of Varalakshmi Puja is to invite Lakshmi, the goddess of wealth, prosperity, and abundance, into the home. I argue that she is created, quite literally, through an abundance of material substances: turmeric-vermilion powders/pastes, an abundance

of varieties and amounts of food items, and an abundance of women's (auspicious) bodies. In Gangamma Jatara a proliferation of materiality similarly both calls and creates the goddess (Gangamma), but the material proliferation and the goddess herself are excessive rather than abundant. The distinction between abundant and excessive materiality is created in part through spatial boundaries in which their respective rituals are performed, the specific kinds of materials offered, and the wide range (caste and gender) of participating human bodies.

The expanding and shifting architecture of village goddess shrines in Hyderabad is changing the very nature of the goddesses so enshrined. These *gramadevata* goddesses traditionally lived in open spaces, at village boundaries, or on the banks of bodies of water. However, the rapidly expanding city of Hyderabad has encompassed the shrines, and sites that were once on village outskirts are now in the middle of bustling urban traffic. While human intention in altering and expanding these shrines was often articulated to be literal protection of the goddess, I argue that these architectural changes have the potential to change (and in some cases have already changed) the very nature and sometimes identities of the goddesses sheltered within. Chapter 4 ends with a counterexample, of sorts, of an expanding shrine for which (highly politicized) human agency is ultimately erasing what the materiality of the shrine itself may have initially created.

Finally, chapter 5 analyzes the creative potential of the unique Chhattisgarhi cement images of Ravana that stand throughout the year seemingly unnoticed by passersby until the annual Dussehra festival, when they are incorporated into the festivities. While narratively Ravana is killed by the god-hero Rama, materially he remains standing. The agency of these Ravana images goes beyond what their human creators explicitly intend. To quote Webb Keane, "Only by positing the existence of objects independent of human experiences, interpretations and actions can we allow, analytically, the possibility of unforeseen consequences" (2006, 201)—in this case, consequences that are creating nonverbalized alternative theologies and politics.

Not all forms of materiality are indigenously recognized as agentic in India. However, that some *are* leaves open the possibility that other materialities, unrecognized discursively as agentic, may be; I have followed that possibility in the chapters that follow. I conclude with a return to the question of where agency lies: in the materials or humans who may

interact with them—or distributed between them—and the significance of context in answering this question. By foregrounding material agency, I hope to expand our understanding of Hindu worlds and the parameters of what we might call “religion.”