

Doctorji the Divorcé

Understanding Bhagat Singh Thind Through His Marriage to Inez Buelen

ABSTRACT Using newspaper articles and previously sealed court records, this article analyses Bhagat Singh Thind through his almost entirely overlooked short and turbulent marriage to Inez Buelen, a marriage that occurred less than a year after the Supreme Court decision that ruled Thind ineligible for American citizenship and only months into his decades-long career as a metaphysical lecturer. In contrast to the prevailing view that Thind's sense of his own race was unknowable, or that he defined himself as White as part of a legal strategy or a matter of expediency in gaining citizenship, I argue that the marriage and subsequent divorce show that he consistently claimed Whiteness for years after his Supreme Court case, both in public and in private, and on the basis of descent, geography, caste, racial science, previous court rulings, and his own blood. **KEYWORDS** Race, Caste, Bhagat Singh Thind, Immigration, Citizenship, Asian America

On a cold and moonless night in late-December 1923, several dozen people drove to the top of a hill in Spokane, Washington, parked their cars in a semi-circle, and left their headlamps on to provide lighting for a brief and unusual wedding.¹ The ceremony was conducted by a pair of ministers from two local metaphysical organizations. There was no wedding party, no one gave away the bride, and there was no kiss to seal the vows. The bride was a Wisconsin-born copy editor for a local advertising agency named Inez Marie Pier Buelen.² The groom, who had recently moved from California, was an Army veteran named Bhagat Singh Thind.

Bhagat Singh Thind (1892–1967) is remembered for his 1923 case before the United States Supreme Court that ruled that he and all other South Asians were ineligible for naturalized American citizenship. Thind's life after the Supreme Court ruling, an over-forty-year career as a lecturer and spiritual teacher, received far less attention. Almost entirely forgotten in the accounts of Thind's life is his early marriage to Inez Pier Buelen (1891–1970) that took place in the aftermath of the Supreme Court decision and just as Thind began his career as a lecturer and teacher. This article examines their marriage through a combination of materials including newspaper articles, published memoirs, historical scholarship, and most importantly, newly released court records from their divorce proceedings. Although the union

1. "Simplicity Marks East-West Nuptial," *Spokane Chronicle*, December 24, 1923, p. 1 and 3; "Soul Mates; Thoughts Vibrate on Same Plane," *Spokane Chronicle*, January 8, 1924.

2. Although she was born as "Inez Marie Pier," Inez took on the surnames of "Buelen" and "Thind" through her two marriages and also adopted the spiritual name of "Agni Truax," which she used often in public. In this article I will refer to her as "Inez Buelen" for both consistency and as a reflection of the name she legally used for the majority of her life and held at the time of her death.

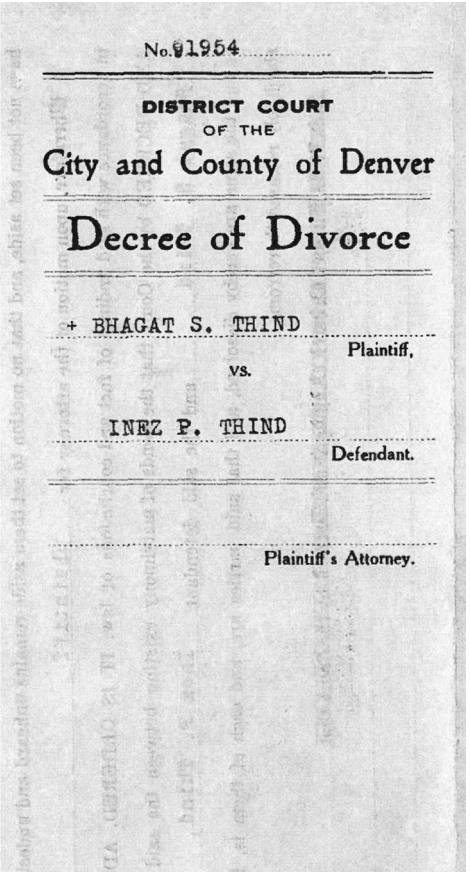


FIG. 1. Inez Buelen and Bhagat Singh Thind at their marriage. From the frontpage of the *Spokane Chronicle*, December 24, 1923.

was brief and turbulent, it provides unique and invaluable insight into how Thind thought of his race, his metaphysical career, and himself as an individual. It also allows attention to be given to Buelen, one of the many overlooked American women who married South Asian immigrants during the first half of the twentieth century.

BHAGAT SINGH THIND AND SOUTH ASIAN AMERICANS AT THE DAWN OF THE EXCLUSION ERA

Bhagat Singh Thind immigrated to the United States from India in 1913 at the age of twenty-one. Like many other South Asian immigrants at the time, he was a Sikh from the Punjab and worked in the lumber mills of the Pacific Northwest. He was also involved in the Gadar Party, a political movement based in the San Francisco Bay Area that aimed to overthrow British colonial rule in India. During the First World War, Thind joined the Army and was stationed at Camp Lewis in Washington state, and there in 1918, he applied for American citizenship. It was granted, but revoked only four days later on the grounds that he was not a “white man” and therefore ineligible since naturalized

American citizenship at this time was reserved for “free white persons” and those of “African nativity or descent.” Thind applied again the following year in Oregon and once more received citizenship in 1920, but the Bureau of Naturalization appealed the judge’s decision, and the case went up to the Supreme Court where it was heard in early-1923.

South Asians in the United States during this time existed within an uncertain position within American ideas of race. Under the law, within popular culture, and in daily life, they could alternately be seen as White, non-White, Asian, not Black, Black, or understood through comparisons to other groups such as Jews, Armenians, and Latinos. This racial uncertainty was often amplified by skin tone and phenotype as well as ideas of caste and religion. South Asian laborers on farms and in lumber mills were often grouped with the Chinese and Japanese immigrants who preceded them as “coolies” by nativists such as the Asiatic Exclusion League. These “Hindus,” the terms used for all people from India at the time, were seen as another wave of the “Yellow Peril,” cheap and unskilled labor from Asia that threatened White American workers and their wages. Religion and caste, however confused and separate from reality, were often used as evidence that Indian laborers were undesirable and unassimilable into American society. Caste also served as a referent to race and class, with “lower caste” signaling darker skin or someone who was poor and uncultured.³

Thind’s lawyers argued to the court that he qualified as White, and was therefore eligible for citizenship, on numerous grounds: he was high caste, from northern India, and was considered “Aryan” and “Caucasian” according to the anthropology and racial science of his day. Thind’s argument also aligned his claimed Indo-Aryan Whiteness with race in America. It included the statement that “the high-class Hindu regards the aboriginal Indian Mongoloid in the same manner as the American regards the negro, speaking from a matrimonial standpoint.” The court disagreed and Thind lost a unanimous verdict. The opinion given by Justice George Sutherland relied on a popular understanding of race that was determined by “words of common speech and not of scientific origin, . . . written in the common speech, for common understanding, by unscientific men.” The opinion was in some way consistent for Sutherland who ignored scientific definitions of race in favor of “common understanding” in the similar case of *Ozawa v. United States*, which preceded *Thind*, but it was also contradictory. Doug Coulson has noted that “Sutherland’s opinion in *Ozawa* expressly approved of two lower court cases that had held Indians to be racially eligible for naturalization.”⁴

Whatever the possible reasons behind the verdict in *United States v. Thind*, it had serious consequences. Bhagat Singh Thind not only lost his case for citizenship because of the court’s ruling, but all immigrants from South Asia became “aliens ineligible for citizenship.” This meant that they fell under a series of preexisting state laws, primarily on the West Coast, that prevented them from leasing or purchasing land. It also meant that their spouses fell under the federal Expatriation Act of 1907 that took away the

3. Some examples include Herman Scheffauer, “The Tide of Turbans,” *Forum* 43 (June 1910): 616–618; “The Filth of Asia,” *The White Man* 1, no. 2 (August 1910): 6–8.

4. Doug Coulson, *Race, Nation, and Refuge: The Rhetoric of Race in Asian American Citizenship Cases* (Albany: Statue University of New York Press, 2017), 52.

citizenship of American women who married non-citizens. Perhaps most dramatically, soon after the Supreme Court decision, about seventy South Asians who had already become American citizens had their citizenship revoked. Since they had to renounce their previous status as British subjects to become Americans, this denaturalization effectively left them with no citizenship at all.

In the wake of the *Thind* decision, dozens of South Asian American men remade themselves into swamis, yogis, and mystic teachers, and earned a living by traveling across the country giving free lectures and private classes of instruction for a fee in one city after another.⁵ It was a role that they could easily fall into. American popular culture at the time was filled with ideas of India as an exotic place of magic, and spiritual seekers in the United States looked to what the historian Catherine Albanese termed “Metaphysical Asia” as a source of ancient and authentic wisdom.⁶ There was also little consensus among the curious as to what exactly the wisdom from Metaphysical Asia was, so with similar ease the dozens of newly minted spiritual teachers were able to establish themselves as physical culturists, self-help motivational speakers, or learned philosophers.

With only several thousand South Asians scattered throughout the United States during this time, there was little to stand in the way of the fantasies of the American public, and there are numerous anecdotes of strangers approaching South Asians and blithely asking about their mystic powers. Theodore Fieldbrave, an Indian-born Baptist minister who immigrated to the United States with his wife, included these metaphysical teachers in his accounting of South Asians in the United States for the *Missionary Review of the World* about a decade after the *Thind* decision. Fieldbrave noted that there were about 3,000 “farmers on the Pacific Coast,” about 1,000 “skilled workers, traders and merchants of the Middle West and East,” about 500 “students scattered throughout the country,” and about twenty-five to thirty “Hindu Swamis and Yogis.”⁷

One of the ways that the shared conditions and differences among these several thousand South Asian Americans manifested was through marriage. As a legal institution, marriage has been a powerful tool through which the state and society exert control over racial boundaries and the family. This has been most visible in laws that disallow interracial unions, and related societal norms. A large number of Punjabi farmers in California, not allowed under the law to own farmland or marry White women, married women of Mexican descent and were able to own land either through their wives or the children they had who attained birthright citizenship.⁸ Many of the Bengali Muslim “traders and merchants” mentioned by Fieldbrave started families and created lives for themselves within African American and Puerto Rican communities along the East Coast.⁹

5. Philip Deslippe, “The Swami Circuit: Mapping the Terrain of Early American Yoga,” *Journal of Yoga Studies* 1 (2018): 5–44.

6. See the sixth chapter of Catherine L. Albanese, *A Republic of Mind and Spirit: A Cultural History of American Metaphysical Religion* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2007).

7. Theodore Fieldbrave, “East Indians in United States,” *Missionary Review of the World*, June 1934, 291.

8. Karen Leonard, *Making Ethnic Choices: California's Punjab Mexican Americans* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1992).

9. Vivek Bald, *Bengali Harlem and the Lost Histories of South Asian America* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2013).

Fieldbrave's last category, the South Asian American men who became spiritual teachers and lectured across the country, were nearly all married to Euro-American women. This was a reflection of not only their particular profession and the contact they had with educated White middle-class audiences throughout the country, but also the extent to which their ambiguous position in America and the influence of factors such as caste, class, education, religion, and beliefs about India could allow some South Asians to be seen White or compatible with Whiteness.

Marriage, of course, is not just a reflection of one's position in society, but it is also deeply personal, and the marriages of Thind's peers reflect much of who they were as people, not just how they were viewed by the law and the public. Bhagwan Singh Gyaneer (a lover of music throughout his life) married Florence Brown, a soprano who would travel with him and sing at his lectures. She lost her citizenship for six years because of their marriage and regained it only after an act of Congress in 1931 allowed women who married "ineligible aliens" to retain their own citizenship.¹⁰ Rishi Singh Grewal married a German American woman named Marian Besack, a fashion designer who ran Grewal Imports in Los Angeles and raised money for famine relief in India. After Rishi Singh's death in 1964, Marian brought her husband's ashes back to India and is remembered by one of his descendants as "the nicest lady I ever met."¹¹ Like Grewal and Gyaneer, it would be difficult to fully understand Thind while excluding who he married, both in historical context and with personal detail. Further, like Marian Grewal and Florence Gyaneer, the life of Inez Buelen is worth knowing in its own right.

THIND'S CAREER AS A METAPHYSICAL LECTURER AND MARRIAGE TO BUELEN

Thind's career as a metaphysical lecturer began in Spokane in November 1923, less than nine months after the Supreme Court verdict. For about seven weeks, Thind gave lectures and lead classes at the Fellowship Society, a group founded by a Baptist reverend named H. Rudolph Otto who became an independent evangelist and dedicated himself to New Thought, a metaphysical school of thought that placed an emphasis on the power of the human mind to influence one's health and material circumstances.¹² The Fellowship Society held lectures and healing services that were conducted by Otto, but it also hosted a rotating lineup of visiting guests: Chelsey of Seattle who taught about magic and mathematics, Mrs. Wilfred Homes from Vancouver who lectured on "The Power That Knows Itself," and Helena J. Martin who spoke to an audience of women on positive affirmations and the power of the spoken word.¹³

Thind entered into this cast of characters and was presented to the Fellowship Society as "a native of India" and an "International Scholar, Savant and Graduate of two

10. "Regains Citizenship," *Pittsburgh Press*, March 27, 1935, 1.

11. Interview with the descendants of Rishi Singh Gherwal by the author in Roseville, California, January 2, 2020.

12. "Leases Old Jewish Temple: Fellowship Society to Meet at Third and Madison," *Spokesman Review*, February 11, 1922.

13. Display Ads for Fellowship Society, *Spokane Chronicle*, September 15 and 29, 1923; "Helena Martin's Addresses Stir," *Spokesman Review*, October 11, 1923.

Universities—Oriental and Occidental” and a “World War Veteran.”¹⁴ He conducted healing services in the late mornings and early afternoons and lectured twice a day on topics that were both of a general spiritual nature and pointed directly to India such as Vedanta, reincarnation, and “The Sacred Syllable OM-AUM.” Thind’s teachings at the Fellowship Society were also imbued with the philosophy of New Thought and he consistently invoked its key phrases and ideas of prosperity. Two of his lectures there made direct references to classic New Thought works: “In Tune with The Infinite,” which was the title of an 1897 work by Ralph Waldo Trine and a lecture on “The Master Key of Success,” which invoked the “Master Key System” of Charles F. Haanel published in 1912. During this time, Bhagat Singh Thind was also the featured guest of another New Thought organization in the city when he gave a lecture to over a hundred people at a dinner organized by the Church of Truth.

The heads of the Fellowship Society and the Church of Truth, reverends Otto and Grier, served as the joint officiants at the wedding between Buelen and Thind. Their presence helps to explain why despite not knowing each other for more than two months, the pair described their union in starkly metaphysical terms rather than as a whirlwind romance. Bhagat Singh Thind explained to the press that the ceremony was “only a formal affair, an accession to convention” since they were “soul mates,” and Buelen said that their shared happiness was built upon the fact that their “thoughts vibrate(d) on the same plane.”¹⁵ Buelen also saw herself as a helpmeet to Thind in his spiritual teaching. She was quoted shortly before their marriage as saying, “I am going to make my life work that of helping Dr. Thind in his truth seeking. We expect to remain here a while, but will go where the call demands us to go.”¹⁶

The call apparently demanded that the newlyweds go to Montana less than a month into their marriage. The couple first spread their metaphysical message in the city of Butte and then to the mining town of Anaconda. Thind received top billing as a “Hindu Truth Teacher” and gave lectures on philosophy and mysticism, while Buelen led classes on healing in the mornings and afternoons, complete with chanting and breathing exercises. At their next destination in Salt Lake City, Utah, the couple had something approaching parity. Buelen led the same afternoon services, but also gave lectures on topics such as “Contacting the Realm of Reality” and “Transcendental Realization.”¹⁷ Thind received top billing as a teacher of the “Vedantic Philosophy of India” and gave lectures on subjects that included “The Goal of Religion” and “The Expansion of Consciousness.”¹⁸

Under the surface of these initial months of joint travel and shared missionary work, there were disturbing claims of abusive behavior. More than two years later, during their divorce proceedings, Inez gave a sworn statement that Bhagat Singh Thind was “extremely and repeatedly cruel” toward her following their marriage in Spokane.

14. Display Ads, *Spokane Chronicle*, November 11 and 3, 1923, 36 and 12.

15. “‘Soul Mates, Thoughts Vibrate on Same Plane,’ Says Spokane Woman Who Became Bride of Hindu,” *Spokane Chronicle*, January 08, 1924.

16. “Hindu Will Wed Spokane Woman,” *Spokane Chronicle*, December 12, 1923, p. 1.

17. Display Ads in the *Salt Lake Telegram*, February 26 and March 3, 1924.

18. Display Ads in the *Salt Lake Telegram*, February 23 and 26, 1924.

According to her, Thind made accusations in private and to “many” others that she was committing adultery, and in Butte, Montana, he urged her to commit suicide.¹⁹

A tacit period of separation followed in the summer in which Buelen primarily stayed in Salt Lake City and taught metaphysics while Thind taught in the Midwest. By the end of 1924, the simmering jealousy reached a violent climax. According to a complaint he later filed in court, Thind believed that Buelen had cheated on him with another metaphysical teacher named Ralph de Bit. Buelen said that Thind confronted her the next month in Salt Lake City about the alleged affair and then struck her “violently” on her head, “severely choked her,” threatened to kill her, and kicked her out of their residence.²⁰ They were separated from that point on.

Ralph Moriarty de Bit (1883–1964) was born in Kansas and worked as a forest ranger until 1910 when he met a Bengali-born spiritual teacher named Akhay Kumar Mozumdar in Spokane, Washington. The Bengali-born Mozumdar was a parallel figure to Thind in many ways. Mozumdar arrived in Seattle in 1904 and soon after melded elements of Theosophy and New Thought into what he would call “Christian Yoga.” Often thought of as the first person from India to receive naturalized citizenship after it was granted by the US District Court in Washington state (*In re Akhay Kumar Mozumdar*) in 1913, Mozumdar was one of the first South Asian Americans to lose their naturalized citizenship following the proceedings initiated by the Bureau of Naturalization in the immediate aftermath of the 1923 *Thind* decision.²¹

De Bit studied under Mozumdar for seven years and received the name “Vitvan” from him. De Bit then started his own career as a metaphysical lecturer and became head of his own Christian Yoga society, and later School of Sacred Science.²² Controversy was never far from de Bit. In 1915, he was arrested on a charge of adultery brought on by the husband of one of his students.²³ In 1924, de Bit and two others were charged with violating the Corporate Securities Act after they were accused of manipulating a woman to join his organization and donate all of her property.²⁴ And in 1926, a woman in Boston accused him of undue influence and taking advantage of his female students.²⁵

For about a year during their separation, Thind continued to speak about Buelen to the press as his wife. In Nebraska, he told the local *Bee* that his home was Salt Lake City, “where he and his American wife have been teaching for several years.” In Saint Louis, he told the *Post-Dispatch* that his wife was “an American, (who was) teaching his philosophy

19. Amended Answer dated September 27, 1926, from the Case of Bhagat S. Thind vs. Inez P. Thind, State of Colorado, District Court, Fourth Division, Case No. 91954.

20. Amended Answer dated September 27, 1926, from the Case of Bhagat S. Thind vs. Inez P. Thind, State of Colorado, District Court, Fourth Division, Case No. 91954.

21. “Naturalized A Hindu Yogi,” *Bismarck Tribune*, May 4, 1913.

22. Daniel Gustav Anderson, “Vitvan and the School of the Natural Order: New Age Culture with a Do-It-Yourself Ethic,” delivered at the Western Literature Association conference in Prescott, Arizona, 2010. Available online at: <https://www.integralworld.net/anderson5.html>.

23. “De Bit Arrested with Mrs. Gerber,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, July 29, 1915.

24. “Cult Officials Arraigned,” *Los Angeles Times*, April 29, 1924, A2.

25. “Founder of Back Bay School Menace to Sex, She Says,” *Boston Globe*, August 3, 1926, 22.

in Denver.”²⁶ But in November of 1925, things came to a head when the estranged couple were both in Denver along with de Bit. According to Buelen, Thind was still convinced that she and de Bit were having an affair and he threatened to kill her for a second time.²⁷ This launched a quick succession of dramatic events.

Thind filed a lawsuit against de Bit asking for \$10,000 in damages for the alienation of the affections of his wife, and soon after, he filed for divorce in Denver district court and accused Buelen of “sundry acts of adultery” with an unnamed man in his complaint.²⁸ A week later, Buelen handed over the physical copy of Thind’s revoked naturalization certificate to a local director who then forwarded it on to his superiors at the headquarters of the Bureau of Naturalization in Washington, DC.²⁹ The next day, she filed a motion for support and the court ordered Thind to pay her legal fees and court costs, and also give her temporary alimony.³⁰ Thind protested the order and claimed that he handed over “all of his savings as they accrued” to Buelen during their marriage and declined to give her any more money until “she consented to resume the marriage relation or at least live with him.”³¹ He was defiant and refused to pay alimony or costs even after being charged by the Denver district court to do so after months of nonpayment.³²

Five months into their pending divorce, Thind filed an amended complaint with the court that accused de Bit by name of having an affair with Buelen. He claimed that they conducted their affair in the state of Colorado on at least two specific dates and over two different periods of time totaling nine months, and he claimed that Buelen had been “extremely and repeatedly cruel towards” him and “inflicted great mental suffering.”³³ Only days after Thind filed this complaint, Buelen stopped teaching in Texas and came to Omaha, Nebraska, where Thind was giving a series of lectures, because she was concerned that her estranged husband was talking about her. A reporter from the local *World-Herald* interviewed both of them separately, and although the reporter’s intention was most likely a story full of intrigue and gossip, the resulting article gives numerous details as to their separation.³⁴

26. “Hindu Lecturer Speaking Here Once U.S. Citizen; Mysterious Influence, Challenged It, With Success,” *Omaha Bee*, February 8, 1925; “That Man Himself is God, Doctrine of Hindu Lecturer,” *Saint Louis Post-Dispatch*, October 3, 1925, 4.

27. Amended Answer dated September 27, 1926, from the Case of Bhagat S. Thind vs. Inez P. Thind, State of Colorado, District Court, Fourth Division, Case No. 91954.

28. “Husband Asks Ten Thousand for His Wife’s ‘Stolen’ Love,” *Denver Post*, November 24, 1925, 29; Complaint in Divorce dated November 30, 1925, from the Case of Bhagat S. Thind vs. Inez P. Thind, State of Colorado, District Court, Fourth Division, Case No. 91959.

29. “Hindoo’s Naturalization Papers Ordered Rescinded, Are Returned,” *Denver Post*, December 8, 1925, 6.

30. Motion dated December 9, 1925, from the Case of Bhagat S. Thind vs. Inez P. Thind, State of Colorado, District Court, Fourth Division, Case No. 91959; Order of the Court dated December 15, 1925, from the Case of Bhagat S. Thind vs. Inez P. Thind, State of Colorado, District Court, Fourth Division, Case No. 91959.

31. Counter Affidavit of Plaintiff dated December 15, 1925, from the Case of Bhagat S. Thind vs. Inez P. Thind, State of Colorado, District Court, Fourth Division, Case No. 91959.

32. “Dr. Bhagat S. Thind Quits Denver With Alimony Unpaid,” *Denver Post*, January 3, 1926, 13; “Cited to Appear on Alimony Charge,” *Denver Post*, March 31, 1926, 9.

33. Amended Complaint dated April 23, 1926, from the Case of Bhagat S. Thind vs. Inez P. Thind, State of Colorado, District Court, Fourth Division, Case No. 91959.

34. “Wife of Dr. Thind Says in City to See If He’s Talking About Her,” *World-Herald* (Omaha, Nebraska), April 29, 1926.

Bhagat Singh Thind denied the presence of another woman to the *World-Herald* reporter or even looking “upon a woman ‘that way’” prior to his union with Inez Buelen. His defensiveness likely arose from the existence of a previous marriage. In his earlier declaration of intention to naturalize and petition for naturalization, Thind stated that he was married to a woman named Chint Kaur from the Punjabi village of Bharowal before he migrated to the United States. He also stated that he was married in the 1920 census, but later listed himself as a widower on his 1923 marriage certificate. Buelen was keenly aware of the previous marriage. Five months before their encounter in Omaha, in the flurry of activity that included Thind’s lawsuit for damages, the revoked naturalization certificate, and Buelen’s petition for support, she reached out to Harry Crebbin, the British Vice Consul in Denver. In his letter to his superior, Crebbin recounted that Buelen was “very anxious on one point, and that is whether (Thind) really has a wife in India living, and whether her marriage to him is therefore a legal one or not.”³⁵ In her initial petition for support, Buelen also mentioned that she needed funds for her legal defense, in part, because she would need to depose a number of witnesses, including some from India.³⁶

Thind’s purported racial disposition quickly became a source of evidence and site of contestation in the recriminations between Buelen and Thind. Buelen blamed the “subtle cruelty” and mistreatment she received from Thind on his racial background, and told the reporter in Omaha, “I learned that he was Oriental to the core. His subtle Oriental ways were unbearable to me. It got so that I became ill when he was near me.” Thind responded that Buelen was “emotional and temperamental” and denied both the claims of cruelty and of being Oriental. He told the reporter, “I am white . . . the United States supreme court revoked my citizenship on grounds that I was Asiatic. It was not because my blood is not white.” This echoed comments Thind made to another local paper, the *Omaha Bee*, a year earlier when he described himself as part of the “Hindus, the purest of the Aryan race . . . fathers of the so-called white race” and other statements he made to a reporter for the *Spokane Chronicle* just before he married Buelen in which he said that “this is not an inter-racial marriage, as some people may think. I am a member of the Aryan or white race, although born a Hindu.”³⁷

Questions about the racial classification of Bhagat Singh Thind became even more important about a month later when Buelen filed a formal answer to Thind’s complaint that compelled her to travel to Omaha. In her response, Buelen stated for the first time to the court that Thind inflicted “mental suffering and bodily violence” upon her, and she asked for an annulment of the marriage on the grounds that Thind misrepresented himself to her as high-caste Brahmin and a white man. “But for her reliance on the said statements and representation of the plaintiff,” read the statement, “defendant would not

35. Letter from Harry Crebbin, British Vice Consul to Godfrey Hertslet, British Consul, dated December 4, 1925, in India Office Records and Private Papers held at the British Library, IOR/L/PJ/12/289, File 1702/25 - Dr Bhagat Singh Thind: Activities in USA.

36. Affidavit dated December 9, 1925, from the Case of Bhagat S. Thind vs. Inez P. Thind, State of Colorado, District Court, Fourth Division, Case No. 91959.

37. Will M. Maupin, “Hindu Lecturer Speaking Here Once U.S. Citizen; Mysterious Influence Challenged It, With Success,” *Omaha Bee*, February 8, 1925, 10A; “Hindu Will Wed Spokane Woman,” *Spokane Chronicle*, December 22, 1923, 1.

have made the said marriage contract.”³⁸ It is difficult to know with certainty what Buelen’s motivations were for accusing Thind of misrepresenting his race. It could have been strategic in terms of the entire case, or retaliatory and in response to his detailed allegations of adultery. One possibility is that Buelen, like many in the United States during this time, conflated caste with race. Unlike his earlier claims, Thind admitted during divorce proceedings that he was not a Brahmin, but rather a Kshatriya, although he insisted that he was still “high caste.”³⁹ This shift may have been enough for Buelen to understand Thind’s race in a different way.

Thind and his lawyer seemed much less concerned about the accusations of abuse and violence than those about racial imposture. They asked for more specific details on the former, but asked for the latter to be struck from the proceedings. The court denied their demurrer, and in response, Thind filed a lengthy statement that repeated the same claims that were made to the Supreme Court several years earlier: he was of high caste, he was born in the northern Indian city of Amritsar, and he was therefore Aryan, Caucasian, and White. He also noted the earlier decision by the federal court in Oregon that made him a naturalized United States citizen as a “free white person.”⁴⁰ Ultimately, the ruling in the divorce case was not determined by either Buelen’s claims of abuse or Thind’s claims to Whiteness. Both sides agreed to a de-escalation. Thind took back his claims of infidelity against Buelen and dropped his \$10,000 lawsuit against de Bit. Buelen withdrew her claims of cruelty and racial imposture against Thind. Both sides agreed to refrain from saying or writing about the other’s moral character or anything pertaining to their separation.⁴¹ The judge granted the divorce on the grounds that Buelen was cruel to Thind, but then ordered Thind to pay Buelen’s legal fees and the unpaid balance of alimony.

THE FURTHER LIVES OF THIND AND BUELEN

The day after the divorce decree, de Bit, the third point in the alleged adulterous love triangle, broke his silence after being the subject of suspicion in a lawsuit for nearly a year.⁴² According to de Bit, when Buelen taught in Denver in late-1924, an unstable local man fell “violently in love” with her and harassed her to the point of declaring his love in the middle of one of her public lectures. Buelen was distraught, and some of de Bit’s friends told him to call on her to offer support and guidance, which he did with his wife. Buelen then became a student of de Bit, and when Thind came to Denver a year later, the local man who was once in love with Buelen convinced Thind that de Bit was

38. Answer from Defendant dated May 24, 1926, from the Case of Bhagat S. Thind vs. Inez P. Thind, State of Colorado, District Court, Fourth Division, Case No. 91959.

39. Replication dated October 9, 1926, from the Case of Bhagat S. Thind vs. Inez P. Thind, State of Colorado, District Court, Fourth Division, Case No. 91959.

40. “Hindu Philosopher, Divorce Defendant, Denies Faking Race,” *Denver Post*, October 10, 1926; Replication dated October 9, 1926, from the Case of Bhagat S. Thind vs. Inez P. Thind, State of Colorado, District Court, Fourth Division, Case No. 91959.

41. Stipulation dated October 28, 1926, from the Case of Bhagat S. Thind vs. Inez P. Thind, State of Colorado, District Court, Fourth Division, Case No. 91959.

42. “Dr. Thind Divorced From American Wife,” *Omaha World-Herald*, October 30, 1926, 1–2.

carrying on an affair with his estranged wife. Given Buelen's sworn statements about Thind's jealousy from the outset of the marriage, it would make sense that this scenario led to Thind's threats, the lawsuit, and the divorce.

In an ironic postscript, seven months after the divorce was finalized, Thind was accused of the same thing that he had alleged de Bit had done earlier to his ex-wife. While Thind was lecturing in Cincinnati, Ohio, a local man complained to the police that his wife had been attending Thind's talks and the influence of his teachings was threatening to break up their marriage. This was not unique to Thind. There was a common belief that spiritual teachers from India held undue mental influence over their mostly female followers, and there were many scandals and legal charges that centered on their supposed corruption of women's morals. The police major sensationally (and inaccurately) described Thind's teachings as "the occult mysticism of the Orient" and Thind himself as "a disciple of Mohammed."⁴³ Thind denied that there was anything untoward in his lectures, but in the absence of any applicable charge he was still arrested for violating the city's occupational tax ordinance and not purchasing a license to hold his talks. The charge was dismissed when Thind paid for the license and his lectures continued at the same rented hall in the city's downtown.⁴⁴

Before his divorce with Buelen was finalized, Thind was adamant that he would never remarry. "She still is the one woman in the world to me," he told a reporter about her in the middle of their separation, "there never has been another, and never will be."⁴⁵ In 1935, nearly eight years after his divorce, Bhagat Singh Thind seemed to have a more wistful view toward marriage. He had a psychic reading in New York City with the famed clairvoyant Edgar Cayce, and two of the nine questions he posed were about the topic.⁴⁶ Thind, a believer in reincarnation, asked who his wife and children from his last life were and where they were located at the present moment in their current incarnation. Thind also asked what his future prospects for marriage were, and with a cryptic reference to a biblical verse, Cayce told him that "he that marries doeth well; he that marries not doeth better."⁴⁷ The seer then told Thind that his prospects for another wife depended upon himself.

Eventually Thind did remarry. In 1940, he wed a woman named Vivian Davies in a Presbyterian church in Toledo, Ohio. Vivian was nineteen years younger than Thind and met him at one of his lectures in San Francisco through her mother, who was one of Thind's followers. They made a home in Hollywood and raised two children together, their son David and Vivian's daughter Rosalind from a previous marriage. There are two published accounts of Vivian's married life with Bhagat Singh Thind: the 2010 biography *Doctorji*, written by Amanda de la Garza and commissioned by Thind's son David, that

43. "Hindu Lecturer Denies He Is a Home-Wrecker," *Cincinnati Commercial Tribune*, February 26, 1928.

44. "Hindu Lecturer Fined," *Cincinnati Inquirer*, February 29, 1928.

45. "Wife of Dr. Thind Says in City to See If He's Talking About Her," *World-Herald* (Omaha, Nebraska), April 29, 1926.

46. Transcript of Bhagat Singh Thind's reading from Edgar Cayce dated March 23, 1935, posted on the website bhagatsinghind.com in 2007 and accessed through the Internet Archive's Wayback Machine on April 22, 2022.

47. 1 Corinthians 7:38.

relies on Vivian's two children as sources, and a passage in the 1987 memoir *The Stolen Light* by Ved Mehta in which the author recalled going as a child with his father to visit Vivian and Bhagat Singh Thind at their home.⁴⁸ *Doctorji* was a romantic and sympathetic insider account of the Thind household that emphasized the love and affection between the couple. *The Stolen Light*, seen through the perspective of the young Mehta, was without any of the same familial loyalty and portrayed Bhagat Singh Thind as an absurd and self-aggrandizing character.

The two accounts were in agreement about much regarding Vivian and the family. Both described the Thind household as a mixture of Indian and American cultures. *Doctorji* highlighted the fact that Vivian's parents lived with them and their ties to the Indo-American community of Los Angeles, and *The Stolen Light* gave readers the shock of young Ved Mehta seeing Vivian drive his father around and the American-style permissiveness she and Thind gave to their two children. These two accounts both depicted Vivian as an adoring companion to Thind whom she viewed as a brilliant teacher and her own *guru*. Vivian was also described as being understanding of her husband's long absences away from the home, and cheerfully handling the requests for his books that came in the mail. In this sense, the supporting role of Vivian bears a strong resemblance to Buelen decades earlier when she was first married to Thind and saw her "life work" in helping him.⁴⁹

Thind eventually gained American citizenship (or rather, regained for the second time) in 1935 through the Nye-Lea Act, which naturalized the small number of veterans of the First World War who were previously rendered ineligible for citizenship. Thind continued to work as a traveling spiritual lecturer, but an important shift occurred during the same period as his marriage to Vivian and his regaining of citizenship. In the late-1930s, Thind became an open exponent of *Sant Mat* (the path of the saints), a mystic practice of meditation on inner light and sound of God within an initiatory guru-disciple tradition, and positioned himself as a master and initiated disciples of his own.⁵⁰ Thind's career as spiritual teacher and his marriage to Vivian lasted until his death in 1967.

Buelen moved to San Francisco after her divorce from Thind and worked as a nurse. She continued to study with de Bit and relocated to Denver for several years in the early-1930s to be closer to him. During this period, in 1937, Vitvan encountered the work of a Polish American scholar named Alfred Korzybski who developed a philosophy of language and meaning called "general semantics." In de Bit's own words, Korzybski caused him to "rebuild the entire structure" of his teachings.⁵¹ One aspect of Korzybski's work

48. Amanda de la Garza, *Doctorji: The Life, Teachings, and Legacy of Dr. Bhagat Singh Thind* (Malibu: David Bhagat Singh, 2010), 28–30; Ved Mehta, *The Stolen Light* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1989), 19–25.

49. "Hindu Will Wed Spokane Woman," *Spokane Chronicle*, December 12, 1923, p.1.

50. The scholarship on Bhagat Singh Thind's connection to the Sant Mat tradition has primarily come from Andrea Diem-Lane and David Lane. They claim that Thind was initiated by Sawan Singh of the Radhasoami Satsang at Beas, but Thind denied his connection to this lineage, in part because he accepted money for his teachings and services. See: Andrea Diem-Lane, *The Guru in America: The Influence of Radhasoami on New Religions* (Walnut: Mt. San Antonio College, 2015) and David Lane, "The Radiant Road to Deception: A Case Study of Dr. Bhagat Singh Thind's Plagiarism," *Understanding Cults and Spiritual Movements* Vol 2, nos. 2–3 (1987): 20–23.

51. Richard Satriano, *Vitvan: An American Master* (Baker, Nevada: School of the Natural Order, 1977), 79.

was “consciousness of abstracting,” described by one of de Bit’s direct students as a method “to enable you to look at the value you give to words and how you react to them so that you can wisely choose the words that you use.”⁵² In the 1940s, de Bit relocated his group from Colorado to a parcel of land in the mountains of Twin Oak Valley about forty miles north of San Diego, California. He named this retreat center Eschatologia and reincorporated his teachings as the School of the Natural Order. Inez continued to follow de Bit throughout this restructuring. She specialized in teaching “conscious abstracting” and became a resident at Eschatologia.

Someone who knew Inez during this time was Erica Maria Moore, a German-born woman who moved to California with her husband in 1938 and pursued mysticism and spirituality. While living in Santa Barbara, Moore attended a talk given by Buelen at the property of the metaphysical publisher Joseph F. Rowny. This sparked her interest to go to the School of the Natural Order and study directly with de Bit. In Moore’s memoir, Buelen is depicted as a warm and friendly presence who hugged her friends and helped her newly arrived neighbors adjust to life in the community. Moore described her as a self-assured student of de Bit who had “no nonsense about the way she dressed nor spoke.”⁵³ She described Buelen’s talks on Korzybski’s Semantics as “(striking) a blow” to those who listened to her, and her lecture style as decidedly different from the “vague and sweet talks about the soul” that would usually occur in metaphysical circles.

Marjorie Coffman, another student of de Bit, also knew Buelen through their time together at the School of the Natural Order during the mid-1950s. In an interview, she fondly remembered her as someone who was fun to be with and had a “cute sense of humor,” but could also hold her own with the strenuous manual labor done on the property that included stringing pipeline.⁵⁴ Like the Montana reporter thirty years earlier who described Buelen as “a woman of unusual intelligence and education” when she came into the offices of the *Anaconda Standard* with her then husband, Coffman knew her as someone with a sharp mind underneath her unassuming persona. “She didn’t seem like anyone special, but she really knew a lot,” recalled Coffman. Buelen died at her home in Northern California in the summer of 1970, just a few months shy of her eightieth birthday.

CONCLUSION: DIVORCING MYTH FROM REALITY IN THE LIFE OF BHAGAT SINGH THIND

A century after his case before the Supreme Court and over a half-century after his death, Thind has become a powerful referent. His story is a simple, compelling, and personable anecdote to frame the four decades of the Exclusion Era and the illogic of race within American law. Thind is often viewed as a pioneering early figure whose struggle for citizenship enabled later inclusion for others. Valarie Kaur described him in quasi-

52. Interview with Marjorie Coffman by the author, conducted by telephone on December 29, 2020.

53. Erica Maria Moore, *Eka: Volume III On Our Own, 1943–1950* (Lincoln: iUniverse, 2007), 96.

54. “An Exile East of Suez Makes a Call,” *Anaconda Standard*, February 2, 1924; Interview with Marjorie Coffman by the author, conducted by telephone on December 29, 2020.

sacrificial terms at a 2013 gathering at the White House as someone “who took on the Supreme Court so that we all would one day become citizens.”⁵⁵ For the Sikh American advocacy group the Sikh Coalition, Thind has been a doubly important figure as someone who “challeng(ed) overtly bigoted immigration laws” and was the first to serve in the United States Army with the Sikh articles of faith of a turban and uncut hair, and they have made Thind a part of their sustained efforts over the last two decades to create accommodations for *kesbhdhari* Sikhs in the United States to serve in the military.⁵⁶ In this casting, Thind establishes a long historical precedent for inclusion of turbaned Sikhs in the American military and powerfully combines citizenship, military service, and religious commitment as an ideal model minority.⁵⁷

But Thind the referent is different from Thind the person. The same passage of time that has seen the lionizing of Thind has also seen the emergence and availability of archival evidence on both Thind and his peers. Much of what has been assumed about Bhagat Singh Thind and repeated to the point of fact is presumptive and a matter of mythmaking. Thind fashioned much of himself, perhaps as an aid in his efforts to gain citizenship or to bolster his public persona as a metaphysical lecturer, and those after Thind have both solidified his claims and added to them. While Thind was an exceptional figure in many ways, he was not unique.

Thind was not the first Sikh to serve in the United States Army, nor the first Sikh to serve with a turban and uncut hair. In 1917, a year before Thind was stationed with his battalion at Camp Lewis, another Sikh named Mohan Singh was training there as a medical officer. Mohan Singh was described by the *Tacoma Times* as “a mark for all observers” with “the small, white turban of his caste” and “full beard.”⁵⁸ Thind himself repeatedly claimed that he was honorably discharged from the Army with the rank of sergeant, first in his 1920 case in the United States District Court in Oregon, and then for years afterward as a metaphysical lecturer to newspaper reporters around the country.⁵⁹ The claimed rank of sergeant was repeated in the commissioned biography of Bhagat Singh Thind and in a 2016 exhibition of his archives, as well as in several popular and scholarly books on South Asian American history.⁶⁰ Not only would such an

55. Valarie Kaur, “My Remarks at the White House Commemorating the Sikh Faith,” November 20, 2013 (originally published on *Huffington Post* and reposted on <https://valariekaur.com/2013/11/my-remarks-from-the-white-house-commemoration-of-guru-nanaks-birth-anniversary/>).

56. “Let devout Sikh Americans serve in the U.S. military” by Rajdeep Singh, *The Hill*, July 17, 2013, <https://thehill.com/blogs/congress-blog/civil-rights/311467-let-devout-sikh-americans-serve-in-the-us-military?rl=1>.

57. For a critique of this conflation, see: Rajbir Singh Judge and Jasdeep Singh Brar, “Guru Nanak is not at the White House: An Essay on the Idea of Sikh-American Redemption,” *Sikh Formations* 13, no. 3 (2017): 147–161.

58. “Hindu to Be Sammy, Too,” *Tacoma Times*, November 8, 1917, p. 7.

59. See “‘Divine Realization’ Subject of Lectures,” *World-Herald* (Omaha), July 19, 1924; “Hindu Lecturer Speaking Here Once U.S. Citizen,” *Omaha Bee*, February 8, 1925; “Psychologist to Give Course of Free Talks,” *Pittsburgh Press*, April 23, 1927; and “Dr. Bhagat Singh Thing, World War Veteran, Will Speak at Sikh Temple Jan. 7,” *Stockton Daily Independent*, January 4, 1930, 6.

60. See Amanda de la Garza, *Doctorji: The Life, Teachings, and Legacy of Dr. Bhagat Singh Thind* (Malibu: David Bhagat Thind, 2010), 15; Labels for medal of World War Service and Great War for Civilization Medal within “Doctorji: Dr. Bhagat Singh Thind Archives Exhibition” at Leatherby Libraries at Chapman University, November 17, 2016–January 15, 2016, https://digitalcommons.chapman.edu/doctorji_exhibition_photos/8/; Marc Aronson, *Race: A History Beyond Black and White* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2007), 194; Christine

advancement be virtually impossible for someone who spent less than five months in the Army, but the transcript of his military record clearly states that he never held a rank higher than private.⁶¹ Thind served as a “mess sergeant,” or someone responsible for managing the kitchen and feeding troops at a military post, and likely let the misnomer stand and elevate his position after his discharge.⁶²

Thind also advertised himself as holding a doctorate throughout his career as a lecturer. He became so associated with this claim that the 2016 commissioned biography of him was titled after his long-standing nickname “Doctorji.”⁶³ It has become conventional wisdom that Thind earned a PhD from the University of California at Berkeley, but Thind himself claimed to have received his doctoral degree from the University of the Punjab in Lahore at the age of nineteen before he came to the United States.⁶⁴ The claim to a doctorate only began in Spokane after a few lectures with the Fellowship Society at the start of his metaphysical career.⁶⁵ If he did hold a PhD when he arrived in the United States, it would make sense that it would have been referenced in his numerous court battles as further evidence of his qualifications for American citizenship. Most likely, Thind similarly padded his credentials with an imagined doctorate and over time this bolstering solidified and became accepted as fact.

United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind is often framed as part of a larger progressive history, but Thind did not challenge the existing standards of racial eligibility, rather, he argued for his inclusion under those laws as a “free white man.” Although Thind was not alone in his views regarding race at the time of the Supreme Court case, from our contemporary perspective it is difficult to not see it as a product of White supremacy and ideas of racial purity. This awkward position has been reimagined in recent years as either a matter of begrudging expediency or an argument made by Thind’s lawyer instead of Thind himself.⁶⁶ Ian Haney López suggested in his *White By Law* that “Thind’s argument [to the Supreme Court] should not be taken at face value” and that “it was conceivable, even likely that Thind . . . couched his arguments in terms calculated to

Garlough, *Desi Divas: Political Activism in South Asian American Cultural Performances* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2013), 201 n28; and Reece Jones, *White Borders: The History of Race and Immigration in the United States from Chinese Exclusion to the Border Wall* (Boston: Beacon Press, 2021), 60.

61. See “Transcript From Enlisted Record for Bhagat Singh Thind,” Item # 20160807, South Asian American Digital Archive: <https://www.saada.org/item/20160807-4603>.

62. Frederick Lieb, *Sight Unseen: A Journalist Visits the Occult* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1939), 42; Definition for a “mess sergeant” from War Department, *Manual for Army Cooks* (Washington, DC: Government Printing Office, 1910, 19–22).

63. See Amanda de la Garza, *Doctorji: The Life, Teachings, and Legacy of Dr. Bhagat Singh Thind* (Malibu: David Bhagat Thind, 2010).

64. “Ancient Hindus Taught and Revered Christ, Says Sikh,” *Minneapolis Star*, August 19, 1925; “Sues for Wife’s Love,” *Denver Post*, November 25, 1925, 11; and “Yogi Plays a One Head Stand in ‘Heelsapoppin,’” *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, October 10, 1951, 1–2.

65. Compare display advertisements in the *Spokane Chronicle* from November 3 and November 18, 1923.

66. See the 2017 film short “All Quiet on the Homefront” directed by Harjus Singh and “Why Cal State’s new caste discrimination policy is a critical step” by Dheepa Sundaram and Simran Jeet Singh, *Religion News Service*, January 27, 2022, <https://religionnews.com/2022/01/27/why-cal-states-new-caste-discrimination-policy-is-a-critical-step/>.

receive the most favorable hearing.”⁶⁷ A recent popular article stated that Thind’s “choice to use caste status as a means of aligning himself with whiteness can be attributed to the dire circumstances he and other Asian immigrants faced at a time when there was no national immigrant rights movement that could have presented him with any other option.”⁶⁸

Nearly all accounts of Bhagat Singh Thind center on his struggles to achieve American citizenship, but as the historian Victor Jew said of Justice George Sutherland, these accounts have Thind appear on stage and exit with little clues to his prevailing thoughts about difference.⁶⁹ Thind’s brief marriage and subsequent divorce to Buelen offers evidence that Thind had a sincere and long-standing understanding of himself as White. He continued to make the same arguments for his Whiteness years after the Supreme Court verdict, both in public and in private and on the basis of descent, geography, caste, racial science, previous court rulings, and his own blood.

While this understanding of himself as White was consistent, it was also complex. As Thind repeated his claims of being Aryan, from northern India, and of high caste, he simultaneously positioned himself as both White and non-White according to the prevailing racial logic of his time. Other aspects of his identity were similarly complicated. Thind was Sikh, but a large portion of what he taught to his audiences were elements of the Western esoteric tradition such as New Thought. Thind had a decades-long commitment to opposing the British colonial presence in India, but he enlisted in the United States Army when it was aligned with the British. Thind lived nearly three-quarters of his life in the United States, but was constantly seen, legally and professionally, as Indian.

Jessica Namakkal argued in her work on the interracial family composed of Benoy Sarkar, Ida Stieler, and their daughter Indira that it was necessary to “transcend the state-based and colonial categories” of their time in order to better understand them.⁷⁰ In other words, we cannot deny the very real ways that such categories work in the world, but neither can we assume that people’s lives exist neatly within the boundaries of those same categories. For South Asian Americans during the early-twentieth century, ideas of race, caste, religion, phenotype and dress, nationality, empire, gender, and citizenship were all interconnected in a dynamic and complicated way. As just one example, the turban was used by American nativists as a symbol for Indians writ large as a threatening source of undesirable immigration, by both African Americans and South Asian Americans to present as Hindu and not Black in the Jim Crow South, and also by a host of stage magicians and fortune tellers to tie into stereotypical perceptions of India as a place of

67. Ian F. Haney López, *White By Law: The Legal Construction of Race* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 149.

68. Vandana Pawa, “Bhagat Singh Thind’s Case Shows the Link Between Whiteness and Citizenship,” *Teen Vogue*, August 9, 2019: <https://www.teenvogue.com/story/bhagat-singh-thind-supreme-court-whiteness-citizenship>.

69. Victor Jew, “George Sutherland and American Ethnicity: A Pre-History to Thind and Ozawa,” *The Centennial Review* 41(3): 553–564.

70. Jessica Namakkal, “Decolonizing Marriage and the Family: The Lives and Letters of Ida, Benoy, and Indira Sarkar,” *Journal of Women’s History* 31, no. 2 (Summer 2019): 124–147.

magic and psychic powers.⁷¹ Thind himself remarked that the turban was part of his appeal to his metaphysical audiences. “With it,” he told the journalist Frederick Lieb, “they seemed satisfied that I am the genuine article.”⁷²

Bhagat Singh Thind is not only difficult to put within clear categories, but he also consistently and deliberately crossed over those same categories. Perhaps the best way to understand Thind and those like him is as a “shape shifter,” a theory advanced by Paul Spickard and his colleagues in recent years to describe those whose “racial or other primary identity” has “changed from one group to another.”⁷³ Shape shifters are not impostors, nor are they contained within the trope of passing. Rather, their identity changes because of a shifting social or political context, as something forced upon them, or as a personal choice. Thind would seem to be a quintessential shape shifter. As he moved from India to the United States, as American law changed who was eligible for citizenship, and as he transitioned into a new career as a spiritual teacher, Bhagat Singh Thind positioned himself as White and crafted a mystic persona that combined his Sikh identity and sharp intellect with claimed initiatory powers and a spurious doctorate. Thind was denied options, yet he still made choices.

The material we have to understand the life and subsequent legacy of Thind is complex. From his legal struggles and career as a lecturer there are an abundance of records, but they were crafted with a clear audience in mind: either the government from which Thind hoped to gain or retain American citizenship or the metaphysical audiences from which Thind drew his livelihood. How we understand his life has been shaped by the assumptions of historians of race and ethnicity in the United States, the aspirations and practical necessities of Sikh and Asian American advocacy groups, and the sentiment and loyalty of his descendants in their efforts to shape and promote his legacy as they see it. Simply put, there are few unguarded views of Thind’s life. Marriage is an institution that is both intimate and legal, and it leaves behind unique traces of one’s life. Perhaps one of the best vantage points to view his life, a view that encompasses his public personae and private self, and also bridges the spans of Thind as a political figure, racial subject, and spiritual teacher, is the top of a hill in Spokane, Washington on a moonless night where Bhagat Singh Thind began a short and tumultuous marriage with Inez Buelen. ■

71. See Philip Deslippe, “The Hindu in Hoodoo: Fake Yogis, Pseudo-Swamis, and the Manufacture of African American Folk Magic,” *Amerasia* 40, no. 1 (2014): 34–56.

72. Frederick Lieb, *Sight Unseen: A Journalist Visits the Occult* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1939), 41.

73. Paul Spickard, “Shape Shifting: Towards a Theory of Racial Change,” *Genealogy* 6, no. 48 (2022); Lily Anne Y. Welty Tamai, Ingrid Dineen-Wimberly, and Paul Spickard, eds., *Shape Shifters: Journeys Across Terrains of Race and Identity* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2020).