Conclusion

This book developed from a yearning to understand why the children on the riverfront of Banaras elicited such powerful reactions from Western tourists and locals in their community. It also stemmed from a determination to explore how these young peddlers and guides rendered their work meaningful. In the preceding chapters, I have argued that the children emerged as polyvalent symbols that enabled tourists and locals to express a range of desires and concerns. I have also made it clear, however, that the children played upon adult fantasies and fears, thereby actively shaping the outcomes of these encounters.

By organizing my analysis around these three sets of actors, one of my aims has been to show how people moving through the same space come to perceive and experience it in very different ways. I have sought to illuminate “the structure of the conjuncture” (Sahlins 1981) that brought these children, tourists, and locals into ambivalent relationships with one another. I have explored how these encounters were influenced by the conscious strategies and performances of the participants involved, as well as by forms of miscommunication, misrecognition, and contingent circumstances. Although these encounters were certainly open to contingency, they were also overdetermined. They were informed by varying cultural expectations; by conflicting discourses on childhood; by the respective positions that these different actors occupied vis-à-vis the global tourist economy; and by their specific locations and emotional experiences within the city of Banaras. In this concluding chapter, I want to return to some of the broader questions that animate this book and briefly discuss the implications raised by this ethnography.

HOW ARE CHILDREN DEFINED AND VALUED WITHIN THE GLOBAL SPHERE?
Within the global sphere, children are defined and valued in multiple and often
conflicting ways. As we have seen, for many of the tourists in this study, the category of the child was still intimately linked to modernist and romantic ideas about the innocence and playfulness of youth. Other tourists, however, were far more likely to invoke premodern and postmodern conceptions of the child as a “miniature adult,” variously praising the children for their savvy business sense or mourning their apparent “corruption.” Still other tourists viewed the children on the riverfront as exploited street kids who were perceived as the “victims” of abusive parents, “despotic masters,” or a negligent Indian state.

Scholars have proposed that such varied yet patterned responses require us to explore how conceptions of children are forged through a complicated interplay of political-economic structures, ideological agendas, discourses that constitute children as particular kinds of subjects, and by the everyday practices that inform interactions within and between local cultures.

Although I have tried to attend to this interplay, one of the conclusions of this study is that the classification and valuation of children should not be reduced to an exclusively social phenomenon. For if “practice has its own dynamics,” as Marshall Sahlins has proposed, then surely these include psychodynamics as well. In many cases, tourists’ reactions to the children were as much determined by their desires to defend against feelings of guilt and anxiety as they were by sociocultural factors. Through processes of splitting, idealization, and denial, tourists, albeit unconsciously, found ways of coping with the extreme anxiety that these children and the surrounding environment provoked in them.

Such powerful feelings may be particularly pronounced in contexts where adults encounter children outside of their routine and taken-for-granted worlds. Yet, even if this is the case, there are likely to be many other situations where adults’ reactions to children are animated by similar kinds of processes. As such, one of my intentions in this book has been to suggest that psychoanalytic theory can provide useful conceptual tools for deepening our understanding of the ways children are affirmed and denied in different contexts.

WHY DO CHILDREN SO FREQUENTLY EMERGE AS SOURCES OF ANXIETY? When it comes to theorizing the way that people in Dasashwamedh responded to the children, however, I have refrained from utilizing psychoanalytic theory. This decision does not stem from a conviction that to do so would risk inappropriately imposing Western models of the mind and self cross-culturally; for while there are certainly good reasons for considering such critiques, my hunch is that some of the unconscious processes discussed in this book are probably universal. Rather, it is because I suggest that locals’ reactions to the children were more culturally and socially motivated than those of Western tourists. As I proposed in chapter 5, locals were far less likely than tourists to relate to these children as “personal symbols” (Obeyesekere 1981). Although the children also
elicited powerful and conflicting feelings from people in Dasashwamedh, these feelings stemmed more from concerns about the changing nature of social life than from concerns with interiority, personal fantasies, feelings of persecution, or desires to recover or discover more compelling experiences of the self. Nor, is this unique to people in Banaras. If children frequently emerge as objects of anxiety it is, in part, because childhood is an enduring structural category (Qvortrup 1994, 6). In all societies, children provide the very conditions of possibility for social reproduction. As the once-famous Whitney Houston song goes, “children are the future.” Or as Mohan’s mother Devika so poignantly expressed it, “sons are our walking sticks in old age, if they break so will we.”

WHAT ROLE DO CHILDREN PLAY IN CONFIGURING PEOPLE’S EXPERIENCE OF SOCIOECONOMIC CHANGE? Thus, it is also not surprising that children frequently emerge at the center of anxieties regarding social change. Many anthropologists have written about the ways that larger-order transformations are read off of the behaviors and bodies of children. Although this study provides yet another example of this, it also highlights the central role that gender plays in such processes. As both Caitrin Lynch and Sandya Hewamanne have shown in their insightful ethnographies of female garment workers in Sri Lanka, gender emerges as a “key element” in responses to globalization (Hewamanne 2008; Lynch 2007). “Cultural norms and expectations concerning gender” play a central role in determining how women both participate in and signify the impacts of economic processes around the world (Lynch 2007, 237). Similarly, throughout this book, I have shown how girls and boys participated in this informal economy in very different ways, and I have argued that they emerged as very different kinds of symbols for locals in the city. By subordinating their participation in this informal economy to dominant gender norms and expectations, the girls on the riverfront testified to the capacity of people in Dasashwamedh to reproduce cultural values and relations that rendered their lives meaningful and familiar. In so doing, the girls nurtured the hope that although foreign tourism might be changing life in the city, it wasn’t changing it too much. By contrast, the boys’ participation in this economy generated fears of “dark” and uncertain futures and it made many locals suspect that both their laboring and leisure practices were antithetical to traditional Banarasi conceptions of the good life. In this respect, therefore, it might be argued that local reactions to the children on the riverfront also evidenced processes of splitting, idealization, and denial, but in contrast to the Western tourists whom I observed and interviewed, they explicitly played out along gendered lines.

Finally, narratives about good girls and bad boys clearly provided locals with a way to articulate their ambivalence about the impact of foreign tourism. Throughout this analysis, however, I have also suggested that part of the reason
the children at Dasashwamedh became such evocative symbols was because through their work with foreign tourists they put a very local face on some of the more pervasive changes and problems typically associated with Indian modernity. Although foreign tourism was typically portrayed as the cause of these social changes and disruptions, in many instances, it functioned more as an alibi.

**HOW AND WHY HAVE CHILDREN INCREASINGLY BECOME OBJECTS OF ‘THE TOURIST GAZE’?** John Urry points out that tourism often provides a “scapegoat” for “undesirable social and economic developments” (Urry 1990, 59). Yet in many parts of the world, tourism has had a drastic impact on local ways of life. One result is that an increasing number of children have been drawn into the global tourism industry. This phenomenon has been noted by scholars and activists working to publicize and criminalize the spread of child sex tourism. However, the kinds of encounters described here have received hardly any attention. I find this surprising because in the course of writing this book, I was struck by how many people shared similar tales of encounters with children on their vacations. Thus, although further research has yet to confirm it, I suspect that elsewhere as well children do often emerge as objects of touristic desire and disdain.

There are complex economic, historical, cultural, and psychological reasons for this, which, in terms of future research, would need to be carefully distilled in each context. In the case that I have been dealing with, we have seen that these encounters emerged as the product of both social and subjective transformations. As I discussed in chapter 2, children’s participation in this informal economy coincided with a significant increase in the number of foreign tourist arrivals during the late 1980s and 1990s, and with development of a low-budget tourist hub near Dasashwamedh Ghat.

The prevalence of these encounters has also stemmed from a subjective transformation among Western tourists. Unlike their colonial predecessors, the tourists in this study wanted much more than just to gaze at local places and people. They wanted affectively charged, interactive experiences. Many of the tourists in this study could be aptly described by MacCannell’s depiction of the alienated, modern-day “pilgrim” who seeks authenticity in other times, places, and people. I have also suggested, however, that some tourists were driven by more narcissistic needs and longings. Coining the concept of the touristic turn inward, I have tried capture this subjective reorientation by highlighting a form of touristic consumption in which gazing is increasingly displaced by more interactive forms of appropriation, and in which the consumption of places is not only enhanced by the production and consumption of personal connections but in some cases displaced by them, as well. For instance, although some
tourists sought out personal relationships with children on the riverfront in the hopes of achieving a more authentic or unique experience of India, many others were far more concerned with having the children discover them.

And yet the question still remains, why did children in particular so frequently figure into these divergent, yet not completely incommensurable quests? The answer, again, seems to lie in a combination of psychosocial factors. At the cultural level, we can conclude that children were symbolically predisposed to facilitate such desires, as they were routinely associated with greater innocence, sincerity, authenticity, and even interiority. These symbolic determinations, in turn, were often reinforced by the psychodynamics of these encounters. Tourists in Banaras often experienced a profound sense of de-routinization, which led them to regress to a more childlike state. Their own feelings of insecurity and wonder, and in some cases, their desires to play and have fun, often prompted tourists to identify with children on the riverfront, or alternatively, turn to them for reassurance. Moreover, in many cases, the children facilitated forms of projection and identification that enabled tourists to more effectively manage their desires and anxieties. While in some cases, this played out as a celebration of the child as a culturally distant yet romanticized “noble savage,” in other cases it led tourists to discover themselves and their own childhood aspirations in these “budding young entrepreneurs.”

HOW DO CHILDREN ACTIVELY NAVIGATE THEIR LIVES AND WHAT MIGHT IT TAKE TO INSCRIBE THEIR EFFORTS WITHIN THE ANTHROPOLOGICAL RECORD MORE EFFECTIVELY? Much of this book, therefore, has been concerned with showing how and why these children became susceptible to “symbolic amplifications” (Sahlins 2004, 190). One of the merits of anthropology, or at least good ethnography, however, is the commitment to trying to understand people as creative, willful human beings who approach the world from unique perspectives. By making the children’s voices central to this book, I have tried to provide a more balanced, and yet also complex, picture of these encounters. As we have seen, the children often understood their participation in this informal economy in ways that were quite different from the way foreign and local adults understood it. For instance, whereas local adults criticized the boys for their corrupt and wayward practices, the boys often maintained that both their laboring and leisure activities were very much in concert with traditional Banarasi conceptions of the good life. Similarly, although girls were praised by adults for the contributions they made to the household economy, the girls themselves often expressed feelings of inadequacy and “regret” that they could not earn as much as the boys who guided tourists around the city.

Such examples are interesting, in part, because they have broader implications for the ways anthropologists attempt to understand and study children’s lives. They suggest that even when children and adults do arrive at very different
interpretations of their actions, this is not because, as some scholars have argued, children occupy an “autonomous” culture. Indeed, when it came to participating and succeeding in this informal economy, and even when it came to their play, both girls and boys were very much aware of adults’ desires, and they drew heavily upon cultural norms and expectations that informed relations among their elders. From an analytical standpoint, therefore, it seems more prudent to explore how children creatively appropriate cultural resources in different contexts rather than fall back upon a reified notion of “children’s culture.”

This is also preferable because, although children are indeed “willful, purposeful creatures who possess selves” (Bluebond-Langner 1978, 12) and who, as we have seen in this book, work hard to protect and promote certain images of themselves to others, there is also a sense in which children’s conceptions of themselves are more fluid and open to ongoing negotiation than those of adults. As Myra Bluebond-Langner has noted, “any meaning that children attach to themselves, others and objects varies with respect to the physical, social and temporal settings in which they find themselves” (12). For instance, in chapter 3, we saw how encounters on the ghats provided girls like Jalia and Priya with opportunities to revise, or at least question, their conceptions of themselves, their work, and their families.

If we take the contextually shifting nature of children’s interpretations seriously, there are methodological implications, as well. When it comes to doing research with children, there really is no substitute for being there and being in the moment. Although I was able to procure some extremely rich interviews with the children, by far the most interesting and revealing data came from hanging around, watching, listening, and accompanying the children as they went about their daily lives and interactions with others.

WHAT CAN THESE ENCOUNTERS TEACH US MORE GENERALLY ABOUT THE HIGHLY MEDIATED AND OFTEN AMBIVALENT NATURE OF HUMAN INTERACTION? HOW ARE WE TO TRACE AND THEORIZE THE COMPLICATED INTERPLAY OF INTIMATE AND SOCIAL REALITIES? “What is your book about?” For a long time, I actually dreaded having to answer this question. Aside from the difficulties I had translating my theoretical interests into something that made sense to the person sitting next to me on the airplane, I also found that the various answers I provided never quite seemed to hit it on the head. “It’s a book about kids and tourists in India,” I would answer. “It’s about consumption and exchange.” “It’s about children and Indian modernity.” “It is about the relationship between affect and economy.” “It’s a book about the articulation of different forms of value.”

There is no doubt that these varying responses reflected a lack of analytical clarity on my part. But I also suspect that they stemmed from a felt need to try and adequately, or perhaps more advantageously, position my research within
a scholarly market that has become increasingly specialized. As such, when I finally did make my way to an answer that I was satisfied with, and that turned out to be very general in its scope, I must confess, I felt a bit nervous.

At the broadest level, this book has been about the highly mediated, often fraught, and frequently ambivalent nature of human interaction. According to Freud, of course, all human relations are fraught with ambivalence. Our capacity to experience conflicting feelings, and repress or redirect them in the service of society and others is a pan-human phenomenon. It is also part of what renders human psychic and social life so interesting and complex. By foregrounding ambivalence in this analysis (and in this book’s title), I have hoped to do more than just highlight a central feature of the human psyche. I have also sought to understand the way that ambivalence is produced in and through the mediations of particular sociohistorical contexts.

Reaching beyond the riverfront of Banaras, I have tried to use these examples as a means to explore, and I hope, more productively theorize, the way that human encounters are shaped by myriad forces and relations. C. Wright Mills saw this as one of the central “tasks” and “promises” of “the sociological imagination.” In a passage that occasionally still brings tears to my eyes, he described the sociological imagination as “the most fruitful form of self-consciousness”; as the “capacity to shift from one perspective to another . . . to range from the most impersonal and remote transformations to the most intimate features of the human self—and to see the relations between the two” (Mills 1959, 7). It does not matter if the “point of interest” is a “great state power or a minor literary mood, a family, a prison, a creed,” or even, as has been the case here, a tourist’s heartfelt letter. So long as it provides us with an opportunity to “grasp the interplay of man and society, of biography and history, of self and world” it fulfills its promise (4). I hope this book has provided such an opportunity and will inspire readers to keep grasping their ways toward fuller understandings of their own ambivalent encounters with other human beings.