

Dalit in Black America: Race, Caste, and the Making of Dalit-Black Archives

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Race and Caste in the Twenty-First Century

Race has become *the* primary category for understanding the globalization of European imperialism as a specific kind of domination. Whenever and wherever racial distinctions and hierarchies occur, racism and the ascribed identities it relies on are seen as (re)defining imperial rule. With the global reach of imperialism, racial identities have become the main site of solidarity among victims and opponents. In this sense, race—like class—has assumed a universality that no other identity apart from gender possesses. Race has become a prominent market of social contract.

But imperialism was not always defined in primarily racial terms. It was only in the second half of the nineteenth century that race joined class, and perhaps gender, as a universal category. Before this, it was often twinned with caste, which originated during the Reconquista and was spread by the Iberian empires from the Americas to Africa and Asia. Eventually, *caste* came to name a specifically Indic form of oppression while *race* embarked on a universal history. *Caste* became refined and bureaucratized while *race* expanded in different directions even as its precise definition remained exploratory. Etymological similarity has given race and caste autonomous careers.

In postcolonial lifeworlds, *caste* was abruptly lost from political writings, reports, media, and public discussion. It became the subproduct of an ancient relic that needed no further attention. *Race*, however, was deployed as a reflexive canon to examine the status of a new nation. It became an overarching global metaphor to

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settle internal national infirmities. Race was mostly a conversation about nativity as ethnicity. Categories such as European, Asian, African, and American came to be characterized as races measured through geolocating the colonial and the colonized. Caste was local while race was locally universal.

However, in the twenty-first century, multiple identities and struggles clubbed as racial unity are voicing their demands within the framework of the global. Aided by growth in communication technology and fast-paced social media, new cultures of anonymity and identity are making their way into social justice struggles. It is not clear whether racial solidarity characterizes twenty-first-century anticolonialism as an international enterprise. In parts of Asia, for instance, religion or civilization comprised the chief category of colonialism and characterize resistance to it. How does race as the legitimate global category compel us to question its hegemony? Will the concept survive the twenty-first century? Should race, like class and gender, be subjected to more questioning than it has been so far? It is here that caste reenters the frame with its capacity to push back on obfuscations determined by the race-nation imperial concept.

This article looks back across the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, tracing routine imbrications of race and caste discourse to analyze national and transnational social conditions. Drawing on archival materials that circulated through the African American press, I trace scenes where Black publics were constitutively concerned with oppressions in India. These traces historicize the possibilities for developing an archive of Dalit-Black solidarities across race and caste.

Sibling Solidarity

The dutiful act of altruism in social justice is an identification with the cause of the unfortunate. It is to see the purpose of one's being in relation to others. These grounds, inspired by care for the spiritual, justify one's moral conduct. But often, solidarities are enacted as if they are acts of political exchange. There may not be a formal code of barter, but there is an expectation that one will recognize help extended to the other. Such solidarities have graduated from intrastate affairs to issue-based organizing by people and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Yet, the framework carries certain limitations. Nationality-centric solidarities emphasize the likeliness of struggles. Distinct situations are conflated through the languages of colonialism, neoliberalism, capitalism, and the like. Solidarity becomes a moral code in the domain of international politics.

The question for the Dalit-Black story is how to frame solidarities without shared histories. These peoples are not bound through any statute of common ori-

gins or any shared presence in the holy books. No testimony from the past validates their shared humanity. Yet such solidarities are built nevertheless. They become like forms of kinship sustained by individual resistances, common traumas, and a shared and frightening future.

The motivation for this essay is an exploration of *sibling solidarity* built not through identification as sameness, but rather through a feeling of relation/relatedness with another. The downtrodden has no one to trust but another who is equally oppressed and therefore qualified to empathize viscerally. This form of solidarity undermines the colonially defined nation-state to make way for new forms of community. Unlike the language of internationalism, which is rigid and predetermined, sibling solidarity is a commerce in optimism concerned with the immediacy of the cause rather than the optics.

Dalit solidarity with Black people is based on an emotional foundation. It is premised on the justness of the work of uplifting the voice of everyone. As sociality changes meaning and form, so does the template of solidarity. Dalit-Black sibling solidarities have faced domestic and international opposition for going against popular appeal and cause. Unlike political nationalisms that can rely on operatives in place to amplify their cause, Dalit-Black sibling solidarity moves through words and the powers of imagination that lay a vision for such. The presence of the Black figure remains proactive in Dalit public culture, just as representations of Dalit struggles circulate in the African American public sphere. Thus, the question for today is, where can race and caste be joined in sibling solidarity?

I look to the African American public sphere for traces of sibling solidarity. Since the nineteenth century, it has sustained discourses and ideations that were not necessarily relevant to the bourgeoisie public sphere, even as it operated through traditionally privileged registers—culture, theology, politics, and economy. The African American press contributed counterpublic methods in an effort to give rise to a public sphere for its constituency. In the tradition of publics as contested forms, it challenged the ruling class, not from a marginal position but by channeling rights and perspectives in the same medium where harm is done. As an act of “truth,” media are summoned to make the case for themselves. Within this heterotopia, I look for some Dalit presence radically imagined.

African American newspapers were among the most effective media to communicate to Black publics about the world. *Freedom's Journal* (est. 1827), for example, was a four-page, four-column journal of current events dually focused on domestic and international affairs. It supported critical engagement with issues affecting African Americans. It worked to counter anti-Black views prevalent in white press culture (Bacon 2007). The editorials had an explicit antislavery, anti-lynching agenda

(Pride and Wilson 1997). The newspaper publicized the talents of African American groups. The classified listings included advertisements of various events and gatherings. *Freedom's Journal* was distributed in eleven states, and it ran 103 issues in total. Its success inspired many journals to confidently assert viewpoints about the community.

In the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, African American print culture expanded. Various people associated with the press—publishers, authors, editors, illustrators, typesetters, binders, distributors, press, and readers—gained prominence as materials made greater impact. The knowledge, reporting, documenting, organizing, and dissemination that were crucial for anti-bourgeois, identarian discourse productions supported a counterpublic that advantaged Black public opinion in a country that was multiclass (Dawson 1994). It helped shape and sustain a neo-Black identity that forged political unity. Black public culture—through media and art—emerged primarily within a Black audience and newspapers and in this regard served the purpose of Black originality (Appadurai et al. 1994).

That Dalit issues made their way into the African American press is a tribute to an internationalist vision and commitment to educating audiences about global injustices and political movements. The African American–Dalit connection was built on a shared recognition of oppression. Despite the lack of an overt solidarity, each of these groups inquired about the welfare of the other. It was often mediated as a regular exercise of checking up on each other. Journals and news outlets such as *The Crisis*, the *Pittsburg Courier*, the *Philadelphia Tribune*, the *Norfolk Journal and Guide*, *Atlanta Daily World*, the *Baltimore Afro-American*, and *Chicago Defender* reported on active protest in the Indian colony and covered the situation of the untouchables. The tenacity to look beyond the bargained power of mediation between English and Indian elites and to report on issues affecting the downtrodden marshaled a point of reference.

Foreign correspondents sent wire reports about anticolonial struggle, the Indian independence movement, and about leaders such as Mohandas Gandhi and Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, among others. Dalit-related topics found their way into columns and popular reporting in widely read journals that circulated through many more hands than the actual subscription number.¹ This creates an opportunity to think about alternative histories that could exist in race-caste configurations. There are possibilities to think of the world as a political imaginary of the many whose views are often assumed to be local and transient.

1. *The Crisis* (1932) journal stated on its first page, "When you have finished with this copy send it to a boy in a camp."

Race-Caste Association

The association of African Americans with Indians is often presented unidimensionally. The dominant narrative starts with Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s political affection toward Mohandas Gandhi, whose nonviolence and civil disobedience occupy a central space in civil rights discourse. However, critical inquiry into these relative histories of oppression remains insufficient, and alternative narratives find limited purchase in the mainstream. On closer inspection, elite and liberal understandings of social movements have shaped, and at times foreclosed, the potential for sibling solidarity through race-caste associations and analogies.

Caste consciousness emerged in the second half of the nineteenth century, in an otherwise race-centric society, with a growing biological assertion of color difference. Daniel Immerwahr argues that it was a way to communicate about social problems without invoking race: “Caste had the virtue of allowing abolitionists to damn Southern Slavery and Northern racism in a single breath” (Immerwahr 2007: 277).

This oft-repeated race-as-caste analysis was discussed and debated in academic and journalistic circles. In 1869, the *New York Times* (1869: 5) announced that the influential statesman Charles Sumner would be giving a talk in several Boston locations titled “The Question of Caste,” leaving no doubt that the radical abolitionist lawmaker “will have crowded houses.” Sumner compared the color system of post-Civil War American discrimination to caste order “born of impossible fable” (6). The structure was generated in the American Republic with white as the upper and Black the lower, even the lowest “pariah.” Caste was slavery; indeed caste was “the corner stone of the whole structure” (6).

Sumner was not new to the caste question. He famously invoked the character of American “color or race” as an institution in the landmark case of *Roberts vs. City of Boston* (1850), which ruled against the desegregation of schools. The “nature of caste,” he argued, was “founded in deep-rooted prejudice in public opinion.”² Prejudice was not created by law and therefore could not be changed by it. Since it was in the feeling of the community, Sumner argued that special provision for “colored” students’ schooling could never be equal. Five years later, city officials ruled in favor of desegregation, making way for the Massachusetts legislature to pass a law that made no distinction based on color, race, or religion for any student applying for admission to public schools in the state.

Sumner’s juridical interventions and lectures generated interest and varied responses among the general public and policy makers. The *National Era* (1847–60),

2. Sarah C. Roberts v. The City of Boston, 59 Mass. 198, 5 Cush. 198 (1849), law.howard.edu/brownat50/brownCases/19thCenturyCases/RobertsBoston1849.pdf.

a national newspaper based in Washington, DC, carried a lengthy summary of his arguments with additional analysis about the caste and color problem. The report drew contrasts among Brahmin and Pariah and “Soodra” (Shudra). Advantaging the relative color mixing within the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, it argued that progress had been made and much more needed to be done (J. G. W. 1850: 1).

By the twentieth century, social scientists were exploring caste in America (Diamond 1983; Guinier 2015: 22). In *The Souls of Black Folk* ([1903] 2008), W. E. B. Du Bois described the racial system as a color-caste order that penetrated various organs of society (archived in Du Bois 1933). Lloyd Warner (1936) investigated the racialized south in terms of caste and class. He worked with and mentored scholars such as Allison Davis and Burleigh B. Gardner to examine social dynamics in 1930s America (Warner and Davis 1939). Davis would go on to coauthor *Deep South: A Social Anthropological Study of Caste and Class*, an ode to the casteist order of the American racial system based on eighteen months of ethnographic study by four researchers—two Black and two white—of segregated neighborhoods designated by caste (Davis, Gardner, and Gardner 1941).

Psychologist John Dollard wrote *Caste and Class in a Southern Town* (1937) to distinguish a post-abolition identity based on the strict rules of distinction imposed during slavery. Caste was an internally developed practice that did not speak of race as a social evil, argued Dollard, although one might be unaware of it. By not paying adequate attention to it, American society was “deliberately and unwittingly profiting” from it “by defending, concealing, ignoring the caste system” (xiv). Dollard acknowledged that his was not the final scientific statement on the social condition of America, and he urged further investment in caste parallels.

W. E. B. Du Bois, the giant intellectual of the African American community, had a different interpretation of the importance of a caste-like system. He deployed *color caste* to address the issue of the Negro, perhaps reflecting the influence of European sociology of class-caste developed under the influence of Hegel and Weber.³ Oliver Cox (1948), noted University of Chicago sociologist, argued against the caste school of racial relations by drawing clear lines between these concepts.

But pundits and scholars such as Cox were perhaps not reading literature about caste by non-Brahmin scholars. If they were, they do not seem to have pursued the lines of argument such works opened. Cox’s citations foregrounded Hindu-Brahminic texts as well as those of colonial ethnographers.⁴

3. The influence of Weber on Du Bois is overstated. Du Bois was an independent-thinking sociologist and almost the same age as Weber (he was the elder to Du Bois by four years). For more on this, see Chandler 2007.

4. One wonders if his Trinidadian upbringing played a part in his intellectual development. There, two major groups—African and Indian—existed alongside each other. His confident appraisal of the Hindu caste system could be found in the diasporic Hindu faith of the Indo-Trinidadians that he was exposed to.

Indeed, such attempts to study race-caste and slave-untouchable were underway. Lala Lajpat Rai's *Unhappy India* (1928: 113) argued that the "Negro in the United States is worse than a pariah" and "the untouchables in India are neither lynched nor treated so brutally as the Negroes in the United States" (104). In the wake of Rai's work, B. R. Ambedkar wrote the landmark text, "Which Is Worse? Slavery or Untouchability?" (1993), highlighting the "double bondage" of untouchables, "the bondage of slavery and the bondage of untouchability" through diverse legal *de jure* and *de facto* positions of slavery (Ambedkar 1993: 742). Then he continued to expose similar issues in *Annihilation of Caste* (1936). In addition to Ambedkar, Dalit and non-Dalit writers such as M. N. Wankhede (1967), Janardhan Waghmare (1978, 2001), V. T. Rajashekhar (1987), and Yengde (2021) contributed works on themes of sibling solidarity.

Juxtaposing Dalits and Blacks

The solidification of the theory of racial supremacy roughly coincides with the rise of a modern theory of caste. Caste moves fluidly through migrations, rigidifying as it relocates, which lends it a spatial character. Caste validates its power through an osmosis of trinities—a valence of locality, tradition, and labor. Without these three, castes struggle to offer originary justification. Caste rules and norms apply not through inner operations of structure but by regulations of the exterior. Without the state and person as biopolitic legislating caste, it struggles to find roots in society. Caste needs its own dish to flourish. Caste transmogrified through localized globalization, or the "global cultural flows" of *ethnoscapes* (Appadurai 1996). It adjusts to, but also changes, local circumstances that do not recognize it. Caste then assumes a new identity by claiming a popular diction.

Caste needs *castescapes* to exist. *Castescapes* logicize existence in postmodern civility. They flourish in places that have caste hierarchies. The carriers of castescapes are actors of privileged identities certified by globalization. With the growing permanence of castescapes, caste and its oppressions receive astounding support from advocates for and opponents of globalization and neoliberalism. Castescapes are rooted in hierarchies, not caged in binaries of angled relations with definitive edges to mount on. They serve to confidently discriminate and to offer spaces of comfort and protection from intervention into private life, thereby prohibiting an external actor—the state—legislating against them.

Castescapes do not offer judgment. They exist between the regression and transgression of contemporary society, coded in the theorems of history. Castescape is atemporal. It advocates neither rebellion nor revolution. It is intended to bring stasis and control to the rituals of history that define identity, name, location, work,

and place in society. Various public institutions support the values and established moral standards of castescapes such as community centers and organizations, media, music, cinema, art, and literature. At the same time, the rise of Dalit counterpublics alters the normativity of castescapes—in countries of origin and in diaspora (Black and Indian)—throughout the colonized Global South.

Race-caste analogies emerge in the fifteenth century, hardening into epistemology throughout the nineteenth century (Sumner 1869; Sweet 1997). In the US and in India, Black and lower-caste groups were doomed to a destiny defined by white and dominant caste patriarchal rulebooks. Dalitality and Blackness were at times compared, juxtaposed for their body-politic and fetishized by the colonial gaze. The untouchables were identified as the “Negroes of India,” while US Blacks were “America’s untouchables” (Howard 1942). One British Army officer in late eighteenth-century India commented that “Negroes” occupied several parts of India, attributing physical characteristics of Dalit to the American “Negro.” Noted Indologist Francis Wilford claimed that “the mountaineers resemble Negroes . . . and in some degree their hair, which is curled and has a tendency to wool” (qtd. in Slate 2012a: 11).

Early ethnologists and scientists defined the fate of “orientals” by describing Indians and Blacks as it suited an expansionist narrative of empire. These ethnologists agreed that the African continent was better off under imperial control. Friedrich Max Müller, the foremost Sanskrit scholar of the era, suggested to an audience at the British Association of the Advancement of Science meeting that the progression of the colonized world depended on the enslavement of the “negro races,” by which he meant lower-caste Indian untouchables. In proposing immediate similarities between race and caste, Müller drew inspiration from Aryan theory in the Vedas—the birthplace of what is now understood as the caste system. Advocating for light-skinned supremacy, Müller championed building light-skin solidarity of “Aryans,” or “Caucasians,” against dark-skinned untouchable negroes (Slate 2012a: 11).

Müller essentialized the Dalit-Black condition, recommending that the British imperial administration utilize caste-based differences to their advantage. He saw colonization as an extension of the caste system, a principle to help advance English imperial interests in India, in the Americas, and across the world. Robert Knox, another nineteenth-century scholar, wrote dispassionately that the Indian empire turned out to be a “profitable investment for British capital . . . [with] the idea of founding a similar empire in the heart of Africa.” Colonizing India offered the chance to establish “another India in Central Africa; the wealth, the product of the labor of many millions of Africans, in reality slaves, as the natives of Hindustan, but held to be free by a legal fiction, might be poured into the coffers of the office!” (Knox 1850: 150). It reiterated the narrative of controlling a land so vast and

diverse through comparison to India and to its social structure—lower, darker races as opposed to the Saxon and Celt (151).

Race-caste comparisons between US and Indian contexts abound (see Slate 2012a, 2012b), suggesting flexible interchangeability between the categories in spite of their differential arrangements and structuring logics. Parallels between African American and Dalit groups have not only licensed oppressions; they have also informed literary comparisons, transnational solidarity discourses (Slate 2011, 2012a; Prashad 2000; Immerwahr 2007), social movement perspectives, and acts of popular revolt (Aston 2001). They have helped motivate counterpublic desires to mount critiques of hegemonic dominance by elites, and subaltern resistances to state-sanctioned structures of oppression.

Daniel Immerwahr went further, comparing race-caste relations to governmentality as a peripatetic concept. The state becomes arbiter in establishing terminologies of difference. Thus, mid-nineteenth-century developments established the terms on which contemporary archives of Dalit and Black movements can be understood. If colonizers interpreted Indianness and Blackness in juxtaposition, or at times interchangeably, in the context of slavery, theories of racial supremacy developed and flourished in a color-defined empire. Caste norms in the Indian context thus prevailed by imposing color-caste order. In the US, dominant-caste Hindus enjoyed the privileges of white supremacist regimes.

By the beginning of the twentieth century, US immigration was exclusively color defined. The 1910 US Census classified dominant-caste Hindus as distinct from lower-caste Indians and from the “Negro” race. Dominant-caste Hindus often distanced themselves from lower-caste Indians by claiming Aryan ancestry or whiteness in their blood. Several early twentieth-century courts ruled on these classifications. Some granted citizenship to Indians categorized as Caucasian (as was attempted by other non-white groups) while some declared high-caste Hindus as non-whites. In 1913, A. K. Mozumdar, a Calcutta-born Brahmin spiritual leader, claimed Caucasian identity as a “free white person” and was granted citizenship in *Re Mozumdar*, 207 F. 115 (E.D. Wash. 1913). This precedent for high-caste Indians to settle into US society as superior was eventually curtailed by orthodox whites. *United States v. Bhagat Singh Thind*, 1923 was a case in point. Instead of challenging the racial system, Bhagat Singh Thind argued for whiteness within a white supremacist order. But he was not declared Caucasian, as conservative Associate Justice George Sutherland preferred a “common sense” interpretation of the “common man,” brushing aside “scientific” arguments of whiteness that were predominantly relying on ethnological data substantiated by anthropological analysis (Lopez 1996: 149).

African American Concern for Indian Untouchables

Some nineteenth-century theories linked Indian untouchables and American “Negroes” at the bottom of a global racial caste theory, while some racial theories put high-caste Indians with whites of America and lower-caste groups with “Negroes.” Analytical observations of Indians and Blacks led to a “Darker Races of Men” formulation put forward by British ethnologist and anatomist Robert Knox. In *The Races of Men: A Fragment* (1850),⁵ Knox argued that “Men are of various races” and that the Negro race is a “despised race”—who drove the French from St. Domingo—distinct from the Saxon, white race (161). Indians, he concluded, had skulls and noses that differed from those of European white colonizers. Darker races eventually brought Indians, particularly lower-caste groups, closer to the “Negro” identification. Whites and high-caste Hindus rejected this formulation by insisting on their purity over lower-caste Indians.

Marcus Garvey, along with W. E. B. Du Bois held the view that Indian disunity and colonization occurred due to caste differences. In his August 1921 address to the United Negro Improvement Association, Garvey (qtd. in Kapur 1992: 19, vol. 4: 174n16) declared, “For centuries India has been kept apart; India [*sic*] has been crushed through the caste system of that country—[due to the] religious differences of the people living in India.” He urged African Americans to model their struggle beyond internal strife. A year later, in March 1922, he reported that Indians were uniting beyond caste barriers, and it was sending a signal to the British establishment. Garvey ran into troubles when he interpreted the “three-way color caste system of the United States by attacking the mulatto leaders,” much to Du Bois’s dismay. In “disgust,” Du Bois called out Garvey for importing the West Indian color line to America (Hill 1982: lxxxiii).

W. E. B. Du Bois employed the term *darker races* to rally for the rights and dignity of non-white groups. His novel *Dark Princess* advanced his argument through the story of an exiled African American college student who falls in love with a daughter of a Maharajah in India (Du Bois [1928] 1974). The work explores Du Bois’s effort to internationalize the cause of darker races subjugated under colonial white power structures. By breaking the white-Black binary and exploring the world of ruling colored races in India, Du Bois weaved romance with a possibility of attaining higher social status. That the main character becomes royalty through relations pricks at the domestic regime that maintained strict boundaries of race. *Dark Princess* was Du Bois’s favorite work (Rampersad 1979: 51).

5. Refer to chap. 6, “The Darker Races of Men,” section 4, “Other Dark Races.”

The feudal and hierarchy-based caste system of India was not unfamiliar to African Americans. Nico Slate (2012a) detects two main points of interactions between African Americans and Indians: comparisons of struggles against racial oppression and caste discrimination, and expansion of the British Empire. Accordingly, conceptions of US empire were contested in the sharpest tones by figures such as Marcus Garvey, W. E. B. Du Bois, Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr., Stokely Carmichael, and Amiri Baraka, among others. African American leaders were concerned with structures of oppression under a racial order that solidified colonialism. This exercise of looking across oceans toward struggle in India, however, was mired with “oversimplification or the outright misunderstanding” of differences (Slate 2012a: 2).

The African American gaze toward India was primarily concerned with race-caste analogies that highlighted segregated and hierarchized readings of race within the United States. Color-caste was understood as a method of social differentiation. It was a metonym that produced vibrant connections of solidarities through regular juxtapositions of interchanging Negro-Untouchable identifications. At times, the term *India’s Negroes* was used to refer to the plight of untouchables (*Pittsburg Courier* 1947). Similarly, “black untouchables of America” or “American untouchables” were used to describe African Americans (Woodward 1986).

Sudarshan Kapur (1992: 60) observes that the African American press, “often chose to concentrate on the working of India’s caste system and the terrible conditions under which the untouchables were held by caste Hindus.” In a review of *India’s Ex-Untouchables* by Harold Issacs, published in the *Baltimore Afro-American*, Saunders Redding (1965: A2) informed readers that “absolutely no group or community of people have had ‘to reach up from as down’ for the barest minimum of tolerance and decency as the Ex-Untouchables” have. Such articulations were an indirect cry for justice and exhortation for anticolonial struggles to stop sheltering dominant castes from accountability. The untouchable concern opened a link to those people whose experiences in America were similar. This almost telepathic connection to others, unmet and unseen but felt through experiences, now had to be seen. That is how Ambedkar, the tallest untouchable of his times, becomes a curiosity and an object of admiration for the African American public.

Ambedkar in Black America

Dr. Bhimrao Ramji (B. R.) Ambedkar was a curious and exciting case for the African American public. An internationally renowned polymath who rallied for the inclusion of the most marginalized into mainstream political society, Ambedkar was a social democrat and an internationalist who took cues from global histories

and contemporaries to make a case for India's untouchables. He shaped struggles of untouchables, laborers, and women in South Asia. His writings characterize a new order, or what he called *Navayana*, a mode of thinking in contrast to the retrogressive totemic order of caste society.

His contributions to Indian society and politics were referenced in the commonwealth of nations (Yengde 2018). His writings, spanning twenty-five volumes printed thus far, spread across the fields of law,⁶ political theory (1947a), cultural history (1947b), sociology, anthropology (1916), history, religion (1987), theology (1957), and journalism.⁷ Ambedkar's pathbreaking treatise on the origins of Indian public finance under the East India Company led to the modern study of public finance in India (Islahi 1994). He contributed to literatures on state formation, liberalism, and modern democratic society (Ambedkar 1946b), as well as Socialism (1947a), Marxism (1956), and communism ([1950] 2019). Legal scholar Kevin Brown (2015) has observed that from a Black American perspective Ambedkar is an amalgamation of W. E. B. Du Bois, Martin Luther King Jr., and Malcolm X.

Ambedkar's moves—as chairman of the drafting committee of the Constitutional Assembly, as law and justice minister in Prime Minister Nehru's cabinet, his proposal for a Scheduled Caste Federation, the intercaste dining efforts he initiated under the Social Equality League in Bombay, and his painstaking fight with the British for the rights of the untouchables—were in the press from the 1930s through the 1950s. On January 21, 1950, the *Baltimore Afro-American* reported that Ambedkar, when he was serving as India's law minister, had been invited to speak at Fisk University. Fisk was a leading Black institution, where giants like Du Bois taught and where many bright minds who contributed to social and political revolution were educated. An invitation to develop scholarly work and advance solidarity between African Americans and Dalits was not surprising.

Noted journalists and commentators such as P. L. Prattis and George Schuyler informed their readership about the “brilliant Dr. Ambedkar.” On June 2, 1949, a lengthy dispatch carried Ambedkar's portrait and detailed his work in the cabinet of the newly independent country. Schuyler, a Harvard-educated business manager for the NAACP, wrote provocative columns called “View and Reviews.” On December 6, in a profile of Dr. Ambedkar, Schuyler (1930: 10) presented an overview of the Indian untouchables' situation as worse than American Negroes in some respects. He appealed to African Americans to make social equality and interdining part of

6. Ambedkar's major contribution to the field of law can be attributed to his role as chairman of India's constitution drafting committee in 1949.

7. Ambedkar ran five journals in different phases: *Mook Nayak* (weekly newspaper, 1920), *Bahishkrit Bharat* (fortnightly newspaper, 1927), *Janata* (weekly magazine, 1930), and *Prabuddha Bharat* (1956).

their *modus operandi*, warning that if African Americans did not address these issues, their position would approach that of untouchables. In a similar vein, noted civic rights leader and organizer of the National Urban League Lester Blackwell Granger, in his *New York Amsterdam* news column, pointed to the pitfall of aggressive foreign policies of the United States and India. African Americans were at times referred to as “America’s Harijans” (Granger 1954: 16).

On May 29, 1937, the *Norfolk Journal and Guide* published an article titled “Missionary Describes Dire Conditions among ‘Untouchables’ in India” (A6). The article described Ambedkar’s efforts along with Gandhi’s toward abolition of the caste system. *The Crisis* (1932) reproduced a news item from *Soul Force* titled “Satyagraha,” reporting that Gandhi would fast until “His Majesty’s Government reaches an agreement with Hindus of all castes, terminating the decree of the Raj that the higher caste should constitute an electorate separate from the untouchables.” It erroneously observed and advertised that the Poona Pact would not “strengthen the caste barriers in India” (351).

Gandhi was purportedly working toward the eradication of untouchability. His spiritual approach attracted early preachers of the Black community. Benjamin Mays, long engaged with Christianity, traveled to India in 1936 to examine Gandhi’s nonviolent civil disobedience tactics as a possible foundation for civil rights struggle in the US (Colston 1993). Following Mays, other notable figures, mostly Christian, drew inspiration from Gandhi’s example.

Gandhi, a dominant-caste, aristocratic figure, was attractive to Black leadership. A masterful rhetorician, he attempted to practice *chiasmus*—the reversal of parallel, verbal structures without repetition. This practice was mastered by Frederick Douglass who, in a liberatory praxis petitioned for Black humanity lost in master-slave (higher-lower) binaries. It purposed reversing the “black slave object into the black sentient citizen subject” (Gates 2015: 40). Henry Louis Gates Jr. argues that this form subverted what was accepted as natural to demonstrate that it was “constructed, arbitrary, and in fact evil” (35).

This move to shame power while expressing appreciation for dominant-caste figures who stand for the freedom and rights of the oppressed is a politically significant strategy. In celebrating Gandhi, Black leadership perhaps wanted to shame and at the same time express appreciation to a dominant-caste figure who was standing by Dalit freedom and rights in the British colony. In the nineteenth century, Indian activist Jyotirao Phule invoked “the good people of America,” as in white people who helped break the yoke of slavery, in hope that his “fellow countrymen may take their noble example as their guide in the emancipation of the Shudra brethren from the trammels of Brahmin thralldom” (Phule [1873] 1991: 4). Phule wrote to enlighten

the world about slavery in India and to discredit and internationalize the cause of caste oppression. In similar light, Black leaders looked for international inspirations and dominant figures to hold a mirror of similar reflection—chiasmus in their societies. They drew parallels between social conditions imposed on communities held as lower and outcaste. Thus, Black and Dalit affective relationships date back to a global pact of solidarity built by the African American public sphere.

However, equally true are the autonomous viewpoints Dalits held on the question of their struggles. They did not engage in solidarity to find the immediacy of imitated or identical struggle. Finding commonalities between independent experiences was a useful anchor where historical, social, economic, and political marginalization could be compared, or even related. However, there was no attempt to understand one's experiences by emphasizing or borrowing another's jargon. Ambedkar was quite specific in identifying the problem his people suffered. He did not bother to make theoretical distinctions because his objective was to detail the cause from a certain site of contestation—the Indian castescape he worked in. In a letter to Du Bois, whose NAACP was petitioning the United Nations about the problems Black Americans suffered in white-ruled post-slavery America, Ambedkar emphasized that while Dalit problems could at times be related to the Black problems, theirs was a sibling solidarity. Ambedkar approached Du Bois as an untouchable finding “positions” of similarity with “Negroes in America” as “oppressed people” (Ambedkar 1946a; Yengde 2018: 96). However, he emphasizes their distinct identities. He neither combined nor attempted to aggregate commonalities but traced their specific pasts.

In “Which Is Worse? Slavery or Untouchability?” Ambedkar (1993) compared slavery and untouchability. Drawing from R. H. Barrow's *Slavery in the Roman Empire* (1928) and Charles C. Johnson's *The Negro in American Civilization* (1930), he surveyed the history of slavery (mostly pre-European colonization) to situate the comparison. Ambedkar was “prepared to allow the comparison of the condition of the slaves in the Roman Empire to be made with the condition of the Untouchables of the present day because it was supposed to be the golden age for the Untouchables” (Ambedkar 1993: 751–52). In the Roman Empire, slaves were educated and granted responsibility as “fellow workers.” They rose to the level of grammarians, artists, librarians, philosophers, doctors, and noble men. The dispensable, unremorseful enslavement of the untouchables was a “hundred times” worse (Ambedkar 1989a: 16). An untouchable's death was not even regarded as a loss. Rather, it brought spiritual harmony because untouchables are considered polluted bodies that contaminate other objects. He contrasted the heartlessness and lack of conscience among Hindus with white liberals in America—philanthropists, religious institutions, and educators who worked to uplift Black citizens (1989a: 87–88, 1989b).

Comparing slavery in America with Roman slavery, Ambedkar (1989a: 84) commented, “How great were the miseries of the Negro in the New World when he became subject to the system of slavery, it is not possible for the inhabitants of Europe or Asia to imagine. They may be described under three heads. The miseries of his capture, the miseries of travel and the miseries of his toil” (1989a: 84). Prior to European slavery, Arabs enslaved Africans in Asia. But this was forgotten because African slavery in America and the British colonies was magnanimous with “sorrowful history” (1989a: 80).

Ambedkar understood the change in servitude to “servants for life” from “medieval vassalage, villeinage, modern serfdom, and technical servitude, [as] *in degree rather than in kind*” (83; emphasis mine). By introduction of various laws, servitude turned into racialized slavery.⁸ The racial dynamics kept changing from European laborers/slaves to Indigenous peoples in the Americas to casting Africans as “sturdy,” capable slaves (1989a: 81–92). Planters’ efforts to extend slavery to whites failed due to public disapproval and acceptance of Black slaves as “dangerous” (83–84). Women became centralizing features of a slavery transmitted to offspring, thus solidifying conditions for “Negro slavery” (84). While in America, “not being a person[,] a Negro as a slave could neither engage in trade nor marry” (86). Due to competitive advantage of skillful African slave craftsmen, white laborers ran a litany of petitions on African inferiority.

In the twentieth century, elite struggles of the anticolonial had a fixed itinerary of refuting European domination of the world. However, Ambedkar’s task remained that of authenticating his particular struggle in opposition to global forces. He might have appeared as a barrier in realizing an international program of decolonization as he attacked the saintly texture attributed to Gandhi. His book *What Congress and Gandhi Have Done to the Untouchables* (1945) was primarily addressed to the foreigner and aimed to attract attention to the plight of his people, who were living a subservient and enslaving life in the Hindu caste order of which Gandhi appeared a liberal patron.

Ambedkar, Black Power, Civil Rights: Beyond Gandhi’s Passive Resistance

For Ambedkar, abolishing untouchability would not suffice. He wanted political and strategic representation of untouchables whereby their dignity was protected. Gandhi’s position, Ambedkar charged, was opposed to these demands: “All this talk

8. On slave codes and laws, see Morris 1996.

about Untouchability was just for the purpose of making the Untouchables drawn into the Congress . . . and secondly . . . he wanted that the Untouchables should not oppose his movement of *Swaraj*. I don't think beyond that he had any real motive of uplift" (Ambedkar 2003: 433). Ambedkar declared Gandhi a humbug (Rao 1995: 119).

Gandhi/-ism was popularized in America by white European writers and dominant-caste Indians during a period of global movements against colonization between the 1920s and 1950s (Rolland 1924; Andrews 1930). On one occasion, Ambedkar quibbled with white American journalist Vincent Sheean, "You Americans all love Gandhi. I have never understood why you didn't import him to America long ago so that we should have been rid of him" (Sheean 1995: 128). Commenting on the trend of biographical writing on Gandhi, Ambedkar once commented, "the number of books that people write on this old man takes my breath away" (Rattu 1995: 118). However, in the second half of the twentieth century, the Gandhian model for liberation was rejected outright by the Black Power movement (Immerwahr 2007).

Amiri Baraka's radicalization was founded in a growing nationalist Black consciousness, shepherded by Elijah Mohammed followed by Malcolm X. For Baraka, the Gandhi model of passive resistance could not apply to a scientific country like the United States. Taking a jab at Hindu social order by referring to it as an Indian "rope trick," he declared, "No one believes in magic anymore" (Jones [1966] 2009: 104). Baraka emphasized internationalism as a strategy for tackling global dominance by whites. Baraka's famous quotation "To go from anywhere to any there" can be read in a context of unity against capitalism (Baraka 1991: xi). His turn to Third World Marxism aimed to galvanize the unmaking of a Black bourgeoisie who, he observed, were "programmed" to think under the patronage of the white world. He rendered the assimilation of progressive forces beyond one-race ideology: "I want to be independent of black men just as much as I want independence from the white. It is just that achieving the latter involves all black men" (Jones [1966] 2009: 105). Hence, a shift toward Black national and cultural consciousness centralized Blackness. Black internationalism has time and again informed crucial identity-making moments in the Black Power struggle.

Novelist O. Killens pleaded for activists not to give "the example of Indian and Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi" (Slate 2012b: 132), because US and Indian contexts differed. Perhaps, had leaders who refused the Gandhian model known of Ambedkar's stance, they may have found his contact influential and his movement a guiding source, as an earlier generation of leaders did. King drew inspiration from Ambedkar's massive state intervention programs for the uplift of Dalits. King's "Poor People's Campaign and Bill of Rights for the Disadvantaged" drew from government policies that were Ambedkar's brainchild (Immerwahr 2007: 296). Ambedkar has

been resurrected in the works of Cornel West, Isabel Wilkerson, Kevin Brown, and a host of African American scholars, writers, and journalists who find some relation/relatedness to his work and politics. There are attempts to find an equivalent of Ambedkar or Ambedkars in the United States political scene.

Conclusion: Cueing from History

Race as caste cannot be easily defined. Neither can the analogy between them. Their uses are always located in history and in relation with subjectivity. Exteriorizing a common enemy gives “race” a workable character and meaning in a multicolored society, but for caste, which is locally rooted, this option is undesirable. It is aspirational, and diminutive to problems venerated as spiritual. Any abandonment of it is considered sacrilege. The orbit of caste is manufactured.

For “emerging communities”—those unheard or unappreciated groups now claiming their agency—the marker of race may not fully categorize their social conditions. What if race, color, or class do not adequately speak to the problems in host countries? Moving beyond the rhetoric of postcolonial structural debates—that of immigration, minority, indigeneity, Global South, and nationality—one must develop a lexicon to deal with diverse, divisive, and new issues for this century, which may not cater to spillover from the past century.

If we take a longer view, however, forms of potential solidarity irreducible to categorical identification come into view. Even as the African American public sphere took shape, intellectuals, writers, and journalists informed readers about Indian freedom struggles. In the first half of the twentieth century, interest among African Americans toward Dalits grew as stories, reports, and press coverage informed readerships about their conditions. The white press, too, was interested in India’s freedom struggle because of a history of British colonization in America, even as Americans were redefining racial relations in the postwar period. If there was a key figure linking India and the United States it was Gandhi, whose saintly image circulated widely to satisfy the genteel, white middle class.

Today, the movement against global oppression from within the United States continues to gather international solidarity from oppressed groups through an anti-capitalist framework. However, solidarities that do not embrace Third World nationalism or non-Marxist jargon cannot easily find allies. In the past century, efforts were made by African American and Dalit leadership to cross these boundaries and establish a relationship based on common humanity and shared suffering under the rubric of caste-class-color line. This proved to be a good start; however, further work couldn’t happen in continuity with that legacy. Half a century

later, an event to commemorate fifty years of the formation of the Dalit Panthers is hosted in Nanded, India, with guests from the Black Panthers organization. The active work of sibling solidarity took shape at the First Dalit-Black Panthers Conference, held May 28–29, 2022.

Exchanges of Dalit and African American icons constitute a new form of harmony based in sibling solidarity, a relation without identical nature, between oppressed communities. This continues with Dalit and other oppressed groups, where sibling solidarity demonstrates the importance of Dalit lifeworlds and is a testimony to the possibilities of a collectively imagined future.

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