

SUBALTERNITY AND DIFFERENCE

Investigations from the North and the South



Edited by Gyanendra Pandey

ROUTLEDGE



Contents

<i>Preface and acknowledgements</i>	ix
<i>Notes on contributors</i>	xi
1 Introduction: the difference of subalternity <i>Gyanendra Pandey</i>	1
Part I	
Gender, sexuality, and the regime of modernity	21
2 "At risk": gender, sexuality, and epidemic logic <i>Dilip K. Das</i>	23
3 "Homosexuals from haystacks": gay liberation and the specter of a queer majority in rural California, circa 1970 <i>Colin R. Johnson</i>	41
4 Different speakers, different loves: urban women in Rekhti poetry <i>Ruth Vanita</i>	57
Part II	
The politics of belonging	77
5 Making London's "Oriental Quarter" <i>Michael H. Fisher</i>	79

viii *Contents*

- 6 Indigenous immigrants, religion, and the struggle for belonging
in the United States
Mary E. Odem 97
- 7 All Strom's children: gender, race, and memory in the
twentieth-century American South
Joseph Crespiño 112
- Part III**
Revisiting liberalism 129
- 8 Thinking equality: debates in Bengal, c.1870–1940
Prathama Banerjee 131
- 9 Mestizo mainstream: reaffirmations of natural citizenship in
Ecuador
Christopher Krupa 149
- 10 Viola's story: re-locating difference
Gyanendra Pandey 167
- Index* 185

Preface and

The present anthology between scholars of the South, begun in meet number of workshops the summer of 2009, a concerned broadly with history, focused in the i theme of a first volume volume) to investigate

Except in two cases, part of the gatherings in volume, the chapters t workshops in India in rough and ready guide

1

INTRODUCTION

The difference of subalternity¹

Gyanendra Pandey

In a recently published anthology, *Subaltern Citizens and Their Histories: Investigations from India and the USA*,² my colleagues and I sought to re-affirm and radicalize the received notion of subalternity. We reiterated the position that "subalternity," like "belonging," is constantly negotiated (and differentiated), and stressed that it is not organized along a single axis, such as that of the economy. We also underlined the relevance of the concept to advanced liberal democracies and bourgeois societies today, no less than to the so-called developing and underdeveloped countries of the Third World or to pre-industrial and pre-modern times. What we do in this volume is to re-examine the idea of "difference," in order to extend and deepen our investigations of subalternity, and to return more sharply to the question that feminist and other oppositional movements have raised, of how modern societies and states take account of, and live with, difference.

In undertaking this task, it will help to prise away the notion of difference from the rather impoverished sense of "diversity," of segments revolving around a center (as minorities supposedly do in the nation-state), a move that assumes that the structure of society, the social organization, and range of political possibilities is always given from the start. I want to trouble this assumption in two ways. The first, which I hope will be readily conceded, is to recognize that "difference" is by definition manifold and fluid. Like subalternity, only perhaps more obviously so, the idea of difference cannot be thought or organized along a single (say, cultural or biological) axis. Distributed along multiple grids, it comes in innumerable forms, appearing differently in different places: malleable, evolving elements and tendencies that come into view and disappear, change, coalesce, and reappear, in other forms, amid other networks, in other contexts. Thus, the idea of difference signals fundamentally, and importantly, a history and politics of *becoming* – not of the already normalized, stable and relatively immutable.

Second, as already indicated, I relate the issue of *difference* – commonly conceived of as “deviance,” or “discrepant minority” (woman versus man, black versus white, African or Oriental against European, Muslim versus Hindu, Jew against Christian, lesbians, gays, bisexuals, trans-sexuals as against heterosexuals), and involving the pronouncement of radical alterity, allegedly based on “natural,” “biological” dissimilarity or long-established and deeply rooted conditions of apartness – to that of *subalternity*, i.e. articulations of dominance and subordination, and the hierarchical ordering of social, political and economic power. What happens to our account of emancipation/assimilation, and the accommodation of “difference,” if the paradigmatic example of the history of difference is taken to be, not as it has been since the nineteenth century, the Muslim or Jew, but, say, dalits, blacks or women – other important assemblages that have often been described as “different” in modern historical and political discourse?

Historians and other social scientists have in recent times generated significant research and debate around the ideas of subalternity and difference. In the main, however, work around these concepts has led to two different, not to say autonomous, narratives – one concerned primarily with “subalternity,” the other with “difference.” One of the more unexpected examples of this split may be the discourse on African Americans in the USA, where the history of one and the same individual body, and a social assemblage identified as “black,” repeatedly tends to get channeled into several distinct streams: the history of the African American Freedom Movement, the black women’s struggle, labor history. Notwithstanding the appeal for intersectional analysis in investigations of issues of race, class, gender and so on, one or other of these (say, race) is often reduced to another (class), or vice-versa, in a great deal of academic and political analysis.

Consider Robin Kelley’s comment on why “history from below” has had little impact on the study of African Americans. “There are those who might argue that all black history is ‘from below’, so to speak, since African Americans are primarily a working-class population.” In consequence, he writes, “Many scholars concerned with studying ‘race relations’ folded the black working class into a very limited and at times monolithic definition of the ‘black community’”; or, as Nell Painter has it, converted the black working class into “representative colored men.” “The civil rights and women’s movements persist[ed] in keeping their agendas separate,” Jacqueline Jones noted in 1985.³ How might we muddy the waters of these discrete streams?

Much critical scholarship, feminist, postcolonial and other, has called for engagement with the “mosaic of quotations” and the “variety of writings (in multi-dimensional space)” that go to make up texts of (in this instance) subalternity and difference.⁴ Simone de Beauvoir famously pursued the twin questions of “otherness” and “subordination” in her inquiry into the category of woman. Sander Gilman has written of how blackness and Jewishness feed on each other in defining the qualities of their difference. Gayatri Spivak has, in her extensive writings on feminist difference and gendered subalternity, always insisted on the intimate connection between the two.⁵

I suggested in my introduction to *Subaltern* the foregrounding of differences of gender, sexual of the state and the dominant classes, has long naturalizing – subalternity. Thus:

Men are not “different”; it is women who “different”; the colonized are. Caste Hindu Muslims, and “tribals,” and dalits [or ex-Anglo-Saxon Protestant] [we should add: heretics in the USA; at one time or another, every; not “different”; Vietnamese boat people, and, astonishingly, Australian Aboriginals a

Difference becomes a mark of the subordinated against the purported mainstream, the “standard presented with are two terms in binary opposition the dominant term is accorded both temporal attribution of difference, then, that the logic of commonly found expression. The proclamation legitimating and reinforcing existing relations of

What the disadvantaged, the marginalized and dalits, sexual minorities, conquered indigenous populations – have done, in response, is to demand a re-arrangement if not an overturning of privilege. For 200 years and more, the political ex as a striving for recognition as equals. The history of sameness, and the right to sameness: “one man, the need to end inherited structures of discrimination in public resources and state power. By the battle has been self-consciously extended demand for an acknowledgement and even priv

In this move, I might add, the deployment departure from a commonly described political academic theorizations of difference have po about difference as developed by subalternize; deployment of a term derived from the dor example perhaps of what Spivak calls “strategi palously delineated ‘political interest,’”⁷ althou we describe it, is not that of scholars studying but of subaltern constituencies and assembl appropriate, transform and be transformed.

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of difference – commonly conceived in versus man, black versus white, versus Hindu, Jew against Christian, heterosexuals), and involving the word on “natural,” “biological” dis-conditions of apartness – to that of subordination, and the hierarchical. What happens to our account of “difference,” if the paradigmatic be, not as it has been since the dalits, blacks or women – other as “different” in modern historical

recent times generated significant unity and difference. In the main, not different, not to say autonomous, the other with “difference,” this split may be the discourse on of one and the same individual “difference,” repeatedly tends to get changed of the African American Freedom story. Notwithstanding the appeals of race, class, gender and so on, to another (class), or vice-versa, in

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I suggested in my introduction to *Subaltern Citizens and Their Histories* that the foregrounding of differences of gender, sexuality, caste, race, etc., at the hands of the state and the dominant classes, has long been a way of organizing – and naturalizing – subalternity. Thus:

Men are not “different”; it is women who are. Foreign colonizers are not “different”; the colonized are. Caste Hindus are not “different” in India; it is Muslims, and “tribals,” and dalits [or ex-Untouchables] who are. White Anglo-Saxon Protestant [we should add: heterosexual] males are not “different” in the USA; at one time or another, everybody else is. White Australians are not “different”; Vietnamese boat people, and Fijian migrants to Australia, and, astonishingly, Australian Aboriginals are.

Difference becomes a mark of the subordinated or subalternized, measured as it is against the purported mainstream, the “standard” or the “normal.” What we are presented with are two terms in binary opposition, “hierarchically structured so that the dominant term is accorded both temporal and logical priority.”⁶ It is in the attribution of difference, then, that the logic of dominance and subordination has commonly found expression. The proclamation of difference becomes a way of legitimating and reinforcing existing relations of power.

What the disadvantaged, the marginalized and the subordinated – women, blacks, dalits, sexual minorities, conquered indigenous peoples, migrants and dislocated populations – have done, in response, is to deploy the very category of difference to demand a re-arrangement if not an overturning of prevailing structures of access and privilege. For 200 years and more, the political exertions of the subaltern could be seen as a striving for recognition as equals. The history of these efforts appeared as a history of sameness, and the right to sameness: “one man, one vote,” equal pay for equal work, the need to end inherited structures of discrimination and denial, and gain a greater share in public resources and state power. By the later twentieth century, however, the battle has been self-consciously extended to encompass another demand: the demand for an acknowledgement and even privileging of certain kinds of difference.

In this move, I might add, the deployment of difference marks something of a departure from a commonly described politics of identity: and this is how many academic theorizations of difference have posited its terrain. For the argument about difference as developed by subalternized groups may be seen as a strategic deployment of a term derived from the dominant political discourse – another example perhaps of what Spivak calls “strategic essentialism,” advanced in a “scrupulously delineated ‘political interest,’”⁷ although here such a strategy, if that is how we describe it, is not that of scholars studying subaltern groups and their histories, but of subaltern constituencies and assemblages themselves, seeking to access, appropriate, transform and be transformed.

The altered terms of the subaltern argument about difference grow out of an awareness not only that differences of gender, of communal practices and ways of

beliefs, have provided the very human experience. The new stance of the very deployment of ideas of unity, unitariness, priority and privilege. The simple dichotomy between claims to equality instead that equality requires the recognition of our differences which separate us. The failure to recognize those differences may have resulted from the ignoring

critical critique of the ways in which the formation of categorical difference – an exclusion of “differences” as relevant to the social arrangements.⁹ It leads us to ask how these differences mutually constitute and interrupt each other. What is the *emity* itself constituted? And what are the consequences about difference in general?

Since the eighteenth century has witnessed the emancipation of societies and individuals, or simply adrift from the time when it is conceived after the Enlightenment, the political form of the “Jewish question” is a lasting comment on the nature of the Jew as Jew, that is, of political difference but demanding uniformity. The “Jewish question” of modern Europe, and with it the idea of a universal order of the nation-state, the individuality – of the Jew, who is excluded, is also too rooted and yet too dispersed to be a very specific, “nationalist” question. But it informs a more pervasive

is a metaphor for far more than the Jews, who are the Jews of the later period, too narrowly community-bound, too deracinated, to fit in as “other” members of the nation-state. In the history of the Jews – a people, a religiously other, as killers of Jesus, as

the only religious minority until the post-Reformation era, a people without a state until the formation of modern Israel – and that of Muslims, substantial populations that have controlled large territories and had state power in many places from the inception of Islam until today. In that respect, the parallel between Jews and homosexuals may be somewhat more tenable – with their similar histories of being small minorities that are persecuted in Christian Europe (the experience elsewhere was perhaps more mixed) until late modernity, culminating in the Nazi Holocaust. My point, however, is about *metaphor*: of a minority that never quite fits, and is seen as dangerous to the nation/state: hence, the Jewish Question in nineteenth-century Europe, and the “problem” of Muslims today.

Yet, if the Muslims are the Jews of recent decades, the unrecognized Other of the era of modern states from the eighteenth century onwards have been slaves and Untouchables, women and other “invisible” groups, whose existence and particularity mount an equally important challenge to the existing discourses of civil society, uniform civil rights and the abstract citizen subject of the new national and democratic order.¹¹ The Jew/Muslim is viewed very quickly as a fully formed, alternative culture and dangerous Other, whereas the precise status of women or slaves or Untouchables as Other (or as minority) is itself in doubt. Several consequences follow, therefore, if we substitute the paradigm of the dalit/black/woman for the Jew/Muslim in our investigation of political emancipation and the making of modern societies and states.

First, our attention should be immediately drawn to the *making* of “difference,” or of a “minority” (or minorities) not already established in their “difference” from the start. Moreover, if we take seriously the proposition that the production of difference, and “minority,” is a process, not a given demographic or sociological condition,¹² it becomes all the more necessary to attend to the *kind* of “minoritization” we encounter in the history of particular states and societies, and to examine the implications of distinct forms of minority existence. Note that “ethnicity” and “minority” are often at odds.

A postcolonial critic, Aamir Mufti, writes of his interest in “how liberalism historically has talked about the modes of apartness of the Jews and the history of their persecution in Western society, and the kinds of solution it has offered ...”¹³ Is the same kind of statement even conceivable for dalits, or blacks, or women? Is the dalit/black/women’s question ever so precisely formulated? What would be the “modes of apartness” of dalits, blacks, women? Can the dalit/black/women’s question be posed as a question of emancipation/assimilation by a dominant discourse that already claims to accommodate or include them? To say nothing of the question, how can women – or for that matter, assemblages like dalits or blacks – lay claim to the rights of separate nationhood (although, as we know, both dalits and blacks have done so at certain stages)?

Or again, consider the proposition that nationalism necessarily “unsettles” large numbers of people, rendering the minoritized populations potentially movable, and leading in many cases to the uprooting of entire populations.¹⁴ It is clear that the

minoritization of dalits, blacks, or women does *not* automatically render them movable. On the contrary, given the nervousness about losing their labor in many instances (the American South in the early decades of the twentieth century, or domestic worlds more generally), subordination and minoritization is often a way of *keeping them in their place* – in both senses of the term. On the other hand, the uprooting of populations (in the sense of settled social structures) may be precisely what a subaltern minority calls for in many circumstances.

In rethinking the diverse locations and uses of the proclamation of difference, the example of classically subaltern communities – dalits, blacks, conquered indigenous populations, women – may have something unusual to tell us, given their uncertain and changing status as “minorities,” as insiders/outsideers who are essential to the continuance of a given social and economic order, and yet have to be confined to a subordinate, marginalized and often invisible place within it, precisely for the maintenance of established structures and relations of power. The specific character of the dalit or black, and, stretching the point only a little, also the women’s case, is that it is seen as being marked above all by conditions of subordination and deprivation, as opposed to the Jewish/Muslim case, which is reckoned primarily in terms of what would be described as “cultural deviance.” What then is the mark of subaltern “difference”?

Let me reiterate my proposition of difference as variety, indeterminacy, play. Not as deviance, or disordered or medicalized condition, not as genetic inheritance, but as political aspiration and endeavor. Not a pathology but a politics. Would analysts still suggest that dalit, black or women’s difference stems from a “biological” circumstance? If this was a common belief once, it is not now openly articulated (at least in the academy), except perhaps in the case of women. Might one suggest, alternatively, that it is the socially and culturally marked body that is the locus of the difference of subalternity? Does the body, and the embodied difference of the dalit/black/woman, stand in place of the cultural difference of the Jew/Muslim? Perhaps this tells us something too about the history of the Jew/Muslims, as the paradigmatic cases of cultural difference.

Explicitly or implicitly, the question of embodied difference is one that several contributors (Das, Varita, Fisher, Crispino, Pandey) engage in the chapters that follow. Several contributors (Odem, Varita, Das, Johnson, Pandey) examine the routine violence of the everyday, as much as of the media, the law and the state, as the site of the production of difference.¹⁵ Yet others (Banerjee, Krupa, Crispino, Pandey) suggest that a subaltern re-writing of history is crucial to the politics of difference. Following from the above, a point that the volume focuses, and foregrounds, is a *political* rather more than a *cultural* foundation for difference (see Johnson, Banerjee, Odem, Krupa).

In the remainder of this introduction, I pursue the question of the politics of difference as these are played out in a range of recent subaltern histories: namely, the dalit struggle in India and the African American and women’s struggles in the USA. I argue that the example of these struggles enables us to reach beyond the

confines of Enlightenment discourse and facile propositions about deviance, assimilation and violence, even though dalit as well as black thinkers and activists of the twentieth century remained constrained by the frame of the nation-state, and the language of majority and minority, in the articulation of an alternative politics.

India’s dalits

The dalits or ex-Untouchable castes of India – known at different stages as Untouchables, Outcastes, Depressed Castes, Harijans (Gandhi’s appellation) or Scheduled Castes (after the Government of India Act of 1935 and the Indian Constitution of 1950) – have been haunted by deep internal divisions, even as important sections among them have sought to fashion new community and solidarity in the political context of the anti-colonial and postcolonial struggles for democracy and social justice. In the decades preceding the end of British rule, as is well known, a number of dalit leaders laid claim to being a “statutory minority,” a “separate element in the national life,” a “necessary party” to political negotiations regarding the country’s future, a separate community, even a “nation,” like the Muslims and the Sikhs.¹⁶ There were many different grounds upon which such spokespersons advanced the claim for the identification of the dalits as a significant minority or community; among them, the shared experience or history of labor and exploitation, propositions about shared sentiment and suffering, and at the other extreme the very fact of statutory recognition.

The particular difficulty faced by Dr. B. R. Ambedkar, the pre-eminent dalit leader of the twentieth century, and by other dalit spokespersons, in making the claim that dalits were a minority no different from Muslims, Sikhs, Christians, Anglo-Indians and other such minorities, was plain. The Shudras, Aishudras, Untouchables, Depressed Classes, Scheduled Castes, whatever the term used for the assemblage, gained their distinctiveness – at least until they became a legally recognized minority – precisely from the fact of their untouchability, that is, the discrimination they suffered at the hands of Hindu society. Gandhi was quick to point out the paradox inherent in the dalit claim to existence as a separate minority. “We do not want on our register and on our census Untouchables classified as a separate class,” he declared at the Round Table Conference in London in 1931. “Sikhs may remain as such in perpetuity, so may Muhammadans, so may Europeans. Will Untouchables remain Untouchables in perpetuity?”¹⁷

In this respect, the dalits were caught in an extraordinary bind, being defined by Hindu society, and at the same time part and not part of it – although one might argue that this is in fact the general condition of subalternity, that of the outsider within. Consider the ambivalence that appears in Ambedkar’s presentation, as of the Hindus. At one stage in the debate on the Hindu Code Bill, he referred to the Hindu shakas as “your shakas.” To a member’s interjection (“Your shakas?”), he responded by saying, “Yes, because I belong to the other caste”, and, a little

later, "I am an unusual member of the Hindu community." At another point in the same debate, he spoke of "our ancient ideals which are to my judgement, most archaic and impossible for anybody to practice."¹⁸

There was clearly no easy escape from the aggrandizing character of "Hinduism" even for a leader who had declared, 15 years earlier: "I had the misfortune of being born with the stigma of [being] an Untouchable. ... It is not my fault; but I will not die a Hindu, for this is in my power."¹⁹ It is in this context that the dalit leader opens up the question of the meaning of so-called Hindu society or community, with a radical reinterpretation of the Indian past – and therefore of the needs of the Indian future. Ambedkar's recasting of Indian history as an extended and unfinished struggle between Brahmanism and Buddhism was a move of far-reaching implication. He was able to propose it, I submit, precisely because he spoke for a constituency very different from that claimed by the leaders of other, "pre-existing," that is to say, on the face of it, already given and recognized, religious or racial minorities (or majorities).

Whereas the Congress's distribution of the divide between the nation/people's friends and enemies was into something called "India" and its "development," on the one side, and anyone who would partition the country or detract from its development, on the other; and the best known "minority" version of the recent history and current predicament of the subcontinent was the Muslim League's proposition of a federation of communities threatened by an arrogant and unduly fixed "majority"; Ambedkar went further in his re-examination of how these putative communities and their claims on the land and the people came to be. "India is the land which has experienced class-consciousness, class struggle [in its most extreme form]," he wrote: "... the land where there has been fought a class war between Brahmans and Kshatriyas which lasted for several generations and which was fought so hard and with such virulence that it turned out to be a war of extermination."²⁰

Ambedkar saw caste formation as a group or class formation. "The history of India before the Muslim invasions is the history of a mortal conflict between Brahmanism and Buddhism."²¹ Inequality was the "official doctrine" of Brahmanism; Buddhism opposed it root and branch: witness, the very different opportunities it offered to Shudras and to women.²² India's Untouchable communities were originally Buddhist, he wrote in his 1948 book entitled *The Untouchables*. They were thrust into the demeaning position of untouchability when they clung to Buddhism in the midst of a warrior and court-inspired resurgence of Brahmanical Hinduism: "broken men," who declined with Buddhism. "We can ... say with some confidence that Untouchability was born some time about 400 A.D. It is born out of the struggle for supremacy between Buddhism and Brahmanism which has so completely molded the history of India."²³

And yet, the claim on a Buddhist past, and the 1956 conversion to Buddhism, was not primarily aimed at recovering some lost, "original" history of the dalits, and providing "memory to a memoryless people," to use D. R. Nagaraj's evocative

phrase,²⁴ although that was certainly part of the object. Rather, the presentation of Indian history as the history of struggle between Brahmanism and Buddhism was, to restate an argument I have made in characterizing the South Asian Subaltern Studies intervention in historiographical debate, to rethink the pattern of historical development as a whole, grasp the contradictions that lie at its heart, and outline political possibilities that have been suppressed or that remain to be elaborated.²⁵

The dalit conversion, as Ambedkar's restatement of Buddhism showed very clearly, was to be a conversion for the future. Ambedkar's reinterpretation of Buddhism cast it as a "religion" for our times, an ethic that promoted rationality and scientific thinking, refused all superstition, and recognized the need for the state to promote social justice and human dignity, or in more familiar political terms, Liberty, Equality and Fraternity – tenets derived not from the French Revolution, as he said repeatedly, but from the ancient moral insights contained in the teachings of "my Master, the Buddha."²⁶

Investigators from the 1960s onwards found that the most common argument given by dalit converts in western India in favor of the Buddhist *dhamma* was an argument about universal human dignity, the opportunity to "live like a man," the restoration of self-respect and an end to feelings of inferiority, all of which followed from the rejection of Hinduism and its caste hierarchy, with conversion "we became human beings."²⁷ Gautama's *dhamma* is like no other," as an anonymous dalit woman's song has it: "A man finds humanity there."²⁸

Let me cite one recollection of a conversion ceremony to illustrate the point. This account of the embracing of the Buddhist *dhamma* in a remote Konkani village, a few months after Ambedkar's death in December 1956, comes from Urmila Pawar's recently published autobiography, *Arydhan* (Items, made of bamboo, the weaving of which was the traditional occupation of the Mahar community in her region).²⁹ "Actually none of us understood very well what exactly conversion meant," writes Pawar, "nor did we know much about this man Ambedkar who advised us to convert." Yet the day of Babashah Ambedkar's passing came to be "indelibly printed" on her memory.

Pawar, who was 12 at the time, returned from school to discover family elders and neighbours weeping: one of them, who worked in another town, decided to take the overnight train to Mumbai to catch a last glimpse of Babashah's body. The atmosphere of mourning lasted for months, while information about Ambedkar's death, his struggle and his wishes trickled in through dalits working in various places outside the village. Sometime during this period, preparations for *dhammanir* (conversion) began. The "conversion" itself was a dramatic moment. Something changed, Pawar recalls. Faith in evil spirits, possession, and "incidents of 'actual' experiences of ghosts," was finished after conversion; and people like Urmila's mother, who had strongly believed in all of that, seemed to take on a new life.

The *dhammanir* ceremony took place in the grounds of Gogate College in Ratnagiri, the nearest large town. Urmila and her siblings went with their *mashe* and other people of the village. "People ... poured in from everywhere,"

she writes. In the midst of various announcements, the mantra of "*Buddham sharanam gacchami*" (I enter into the Buddha's protection) "floated down to us and we joined our voices with the chanting crowd."

After the ceremony, the villagers were told to discard the gods they worshipped and throw the idols into the water. Urmila half expected that her mother would refuse, given that theirs was a priest's family and that many of the family idols were quite valuable. Instead, her mother "picked up some idols and threw them [away] herself." A dalit elder placed a small statue of the Buddha and a photograph of Ambedkar in Urmila's mother's prayer room. People went from house to house every evening venerating the Buddha, recalls Pawar. "*Their faces glowed. You would think there was no longer any need to ask for happiness ... as ... [if] had automatically come to us*" (emphasis mine).

Other recollections of dalit conversions to Buddhism in different villages and towns, following Ambedkar's embracing of the *dhamma* in 1956, provide a similar sense of anticipation and of a political difference already at hand. In account after account, "conversion" appears as a magical time. "The *diksha* ceremony was completed in a joyful atmosphere," writes Shanabai Krishnaji Kamble, of the ceremony in her husband's village of Kargani in 1957. "The struggle yielded us three jewels —," writes another dalit memoirist, Baby Kamble: "humanity, education and the religion of the Buddha. ... The flame of Bhim started burning in our hearts. We began to walk and talk. We became conscious that we too are human beings."³⁰

Without wishing to understate the power of the continuing divisions among the hundreds, if not thousands, of dalit castes and sub-castes, differentially arranged as they are in an unyielding caste hierarchy, I am suggesting that the dalit "conversion" aims to inaugurate a new community, and a new politics and culture. This is a point to which I shall return at the end of this introduction.

African Americans and African American women

By contrast with the history of the dalit struggle to forge a unified and recognizable dalit "community" to establish its "difference," the separate identity of the African American people and culture seems to be in place from their arrival on American shores — or so the legend has it. The experience of slavery, the legal and social barriers against access to basic resources for people of African descent in much of the USA for much of its history, the visibility of skin color, and the discourse of nineteenth-century "science," "civilization" and "race," have served to establish this as common sense. Hence the force of Du Bois's moving statement of how the African American

ever feels his twoness — an American, a Negro, two souls ... in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder. The history of the American Negro is the history of this strife, — this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self.

The American Negro does not seek to "Africanize America," Du Bois goes on to say, for America has too much to teach the world and Africa. He would not bleach his Negro soul in a flood of white Americanism, for he knows that Negro blood has a message for the world. He simply wishes to make it possible for a man to be both a Negro and an American.³¹

And yet, as we know, an African American character, culture and politics has never been present so simply or in such an accessible form. The point is well illustrated by the uncertainty, ambiguity and contradiction that attends the claim of African American identity and culture, given the diverse origins, multi-directional migrations, miscegenation, and geographical and social dispersal of the peoples involved,³² and again by the debate among black feminists in the USA over black women's primary political identity or commitment, and the "community" they would (or could) speak for.

Important activists and writers engaged with the issue of how the struggles against racism and sexism in American society might be brought into alliance have adopted divergent positions on the latter question. For bell hooks, "racial imperialism" as she calls it trumps "sexual imperialism" in US history. "Racism took precedence over sexual alliances in both the white world's interaction with Native Americans and African Americans, just as racism overshadowed any bonding between black women and white women on the basis of sex."³³ Theoretically and in the law, white women may also have been the "property" of their men, she notes, yet they were not systematically subjected to the brutal oppression and dehumanization of the black slave. The attempt of some white feminists to suggest a similarity in the day-to-day experiences of white and black women only reveals a shocking insensitivity to the plight of the latter.

Other commentators have reiterated the argument. "In their poverty and vulnerability," writes Jacqueline Jones,

black people experienced ... historical economic transformations in fundamentally different ways compared to whites regardless of class, and black women, while not removed from the larger history of the American working class, shouldered unique burdens at home and endured unique forms of discrimination in the workplace.³⁴

Consequently, black women have remained single more often, borne more children, had the burden of heading single-parent families more frequently, remained in the labor market longer and in greater numbers, had less education, earned less, and been widowed earlier, than their white counterparts.

In addition, as several scholars have noted, white women have widely served as agents of racism in the USA. As one middle-aged black woman domestic worker cited by Jones put it,

Black men will make a fool out of me if I let them, but it was a white woman who had me crawling around her apartment before I was thirteen years old, cleaning places she would never think of cleaning with a toothbrush and toothpick!³⁵

hooks recalls that in the mid-nineteenth century Sojourner Truth had to bare her breasts to prove that she was a woman before she was allowed to speak at a political meeting – and that an anti-slavery rally of white women and men. For whom, and on whose behalf, could the black woman (or man) speak, when blacks were recognized only as “female” and “male,” chattel and property, by most of white America?³⁶

Audre Lorde writes about differences among women that American feminists must reckon with: “Poor women and women of Color know there is a difference between the daily manifestations of marital slavery [on the one hand] and prostitution [on the other] because it is our daughters who live 42nd Street.” Lorraine Bethel states the position more polemically: “WHAT CHOU MEAN WE, WHITE GIRL?”³⁷

The point is simple. While the importance of the women’s movement is obvious, in the US as elsewhere, the category of “women” and “women’s rights” is constituted only by suspending other differences – between women of different races, for example.³⁸ Likewise, the category of “blacks” or “African Americans” works to a large extent by covering over a number of important differences within the black “community” – differences of color, and the advantages that pale skin and straight hair might bring, in addition to differences of gender, sexuality, age, class and so on. Historically, Audre Lorde notes, “difference had been used so cruelly against us” that “we” (blacks) cannot tolerate any sign of divergence within “our externally defined ... Blackness.”³⁹

In the reconstruction of the history of the Black Freedom Struggle, Darlene Clark Hine writes, “Black women were conspicuous by their absence.” She notes that, for some time even after she became a professor of history, she herself had not thought of Black women “as historical subjects with their own relations to a state’s history.” It was an “unwelcome” invitation from a local school teacher, and head of the Indiana unit of the National Council for Negro Women, Shirley Herd, which shamed Hine – as the only tenured black woman historian in the local university – into turning her attention to the history of black women in Indiana.⁴⁰

As she began reading late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century autobiographies of “migrating, or fleeing, black women,” it became clear, says Hine, that these women were sexual hostages and victims of domestic violence throughout the USA. The relationship between black women and the larger society – white men and women, and, to a lesser extent, black men – “has always been, and continues to be, adversarial,” involving as it did a “multifaceted struggle to determine who would control black women’s productive and reproductive capacities and their sexuality.”⁴¹

Interestingly, Hine now began to divide her survey courses on modern African American history into four broad themes: the Civil War and Emancipation, the Great Migrations, the Civil Rights Movement, and the Changing Status of Black Women. The lack of fit between the first three and the last tells its own story.⁴² In any event, investigations of the history of black women underscored for Hine the need for intersectional analysis, for “this particular group of Americans has always occupied the bottom rung of any racial, sexual, and class hierarchy.” Three issues have been central in the history of the protest and migration of black women, she argues: the fact (and fear) of rape, domestic violence, and the desire to escape severe economic exploitation and deprivation. Among other oversight, historians and other social scientists have paid too little attention to the working-class status and economic condition of black women.

The fact is that the vast majority of black women have lived in overwhelming poverty, and a lack of attention to that fact has helped to foster erroneous impressions in the larger society of the mythical, heroic, transcendent black woman able to do the impossible, to make a way out of no way.⁴³

With those cautionary observations in mind, let us mark the specific conjuncture, and the specific constructions of history and social relations, that produce Du Bois’s “problem of the color line” as the central problem of the age, and his articulation of the “striving in the souls of black folk” toward the “ideal of human brotherhood, gained through the unifying ideal of Race.” Recall that this is at the very beginning of the twentieth century.⁴⁴ He follows the above statement with the stirring lines,

there are today no truer exponents of the pure spirit of the Declaration of Independence than the American Negroes; there is no true American music but the wild sweet melodies of the Negro slave; the American fairy tales and folklore are Indian and African; and, all in all, we black men seem the sole oasis of simple faith and reverence in a dusty desert of dollars and smartness.⁴⁵

Here, race and culture emerge in a somewhat essentialist form as the unifying principles in the history of African Americans and their struggle for human dignity: virtues almost inherent in the genes – and in “the souls” of black folk. At a later stage in his career, when he was strongly influenced by Marxism, Du Bois would have shunk from many aspects of the above formulation. The claims vary, but the point I wish to emphasize is that the subaltern assertion of difference is a claim to difference and sameness – a different “sameness” – at one and the same time.

Political/cultural difference

Let me return at this point to the history of the dalit “conversion” to Buddhism: for Ambedkar’s reflections on this long-drawn-out event help to clarify something about the manner of the establishment of political (or, for that matter, religious)

community. Increasingly from the 1930s, Ambedkar and a number of other dalit leaders had begun to advocate the renouncing of Hinduism as a means of solving "the problem of the Untouchables." Gandhi, dedicated in his own way to the abolition of untouchability, differed. What was needed, he argued, was the reform of Hinduism, or "self-purification." Conversion was not the answer. One cannot change one's religion as if it were a house or a cloak, he wrote. For Gandhi, the threat of dalit conversion flowed from a *political* rather than a religious impulse.⁴⁶

Ambedkar's rejoinder to this is important for my purposes. Apart from making a pointed comment on precisely the political character of much of the religious history of the world, and of much that counted as conversion, he met Gandhi's "house and cloak" metaphor with an equally polemical but telling response. Religion today was like a piece of ancestral property, he noted, passed on from parent to child and accepted unthinkingly. "What genuineness is there in such [religious beliefs]?"⁴⁷ "The conversion of the Untouchables if it did take place," he wrote, after a dalit conference in Bombay that considered the question in May 1936, "would take [place] after full deliberation of the value of religion and the virtue of different religions. ... It would be the first case in history of genuine conversion."⁴⁸

The dalit leader here points to the long process of thinking and deliberation, both social and individual, that must accompany a dalit conversion. It is the *process*, the epistemic effort, that counts, he might have added. For Ambedkar's "first case ... of genuine conversion" might also be seen as a "first step" in the making of a *difference* – which would be a *political* difference, whatever else it was.

The articulation of a similar political difference is evident in Du Bois's *Souls of Black Folk* too. Du Bois writes of the "little community" in the hills of Tennessee where he taught school for two summers in the 1880s, a "community" built around figures like the 20-year-old Josie who worked day and night – at "service" (in white people's homes), in her own home, in the fields and orchards; and her mother who talked of the sewing-machine Josie had bought to supplement the family income, of how Josie longed to go to school but they never had the savings to allow it, how the crops failed, and how "mean" some white folks were. "I have called my tiny community a world," writes Du Bois:

and so its isolation made it. There was among us but a half-awakened common consciousness, sprung from common joy and grief ...; from a common hardship in poverty ...; and, above all, from the sight of the Veil that hung between us and Opportunity. All this caused us to think some thoughts together; but these, when ripe for speech, were spoken in various languages.⁴⁹

In the case of the blacks and the dalits, as in that of many other subalternized "minorities" – the internally colonized we might call them, who do not inhabit a geo-political space that provides easy ground for a politics of separation or of independent nationhood (and I would include women here) – it has never been a straightforward task to mark out a sequestered domain of an autonomous "culture."

The claim of a unified and alternative "culture" and "tradition" is established here, if it is established, only through long and hard struggle: witness, the strong arguments for and against claiming a separate culture of "womankind" in the early stages of the women's movement.

Here, "culture" and "tradition" are more deliberately forged, and far more openly contested, than the cultural claims of more privileged groups with more secure cultural institutions (and funding) and greater access to political power; and the politics that accompany their construction are never quite so easily wished away. The condition of subalternity limits the range of possibilities and the language of difference. Yet the subaltern finds resources in her experience and her body, even the body as it is ground down. Du Bois's first encounter with prayer in the Southern black church illustrates the proposition very well:

A sort of suppressed terror hung in the air and seemed to seize them. ... The black and massive form of the preacher swayed and quivered as the words crowded to his lips and flew at us in singular eloquence. The people moaned and fluttered, and then the gaunt-checked woman beside me suddenly leapt straight into the air and shrieked like a lost soul, while round about came wail and groan and outcry, and a scene of human passion such as I had never conceived before.⁵⁰

Viola Andrews, a poor black woman from rural Georgia about whom I write in the last chapter of this anthology, provides another indication of the power of "traditional" resources. "The white man could not lose [lose]," she says in her unpublished autobiographical writings: "The colored man could not win." Most colored folk in the early twentieth-century American South lived on plantations, chopped and hoed cotton, and worked "from can't to can't" (cannot see before day to cannot see after dark). "They never had enough."⁵¹

However, while Southern blacks had no wealth, or social privilege, they had music. "That's one thing the colored folks had: they had a song. There is something about singing, one can survive if they have a Song." So, Viola tells us, barefoot, working in the fields, or walking to church, the black folk sang:

"Go down Moses: way down in Egypt land: Tell old pharaoh: let my people go"
or: "I'm so glad: trouble don't last always"
or: "I got shoes, you got shoes, all God's Children [children] got shoes"

"Mentally," she observes, "they dipped into the far future – into eternity: ... when God will vindicate his own."

Her "greatest Blessing," Viola writes, "was finding and knowing God when I was young." At Easter in 1961, she heard on the radio: "He arose. He arose and he arose from the Dead." And: "I believed it. ... Yes I believed in the God of the Bible and I trusted in him."⁵² As a child, she recalls, she sometimes thought that

there were two Gods, two Heavens, one for the colored, one for the whites. In general, however, she was skeptical about the white folks' religion. "The colored had no faith in their [the white folks'] Christianity." Would blacks and whites be separated in heaven, someone in the African American community occasionally asked. The answer was "No": there would be no white people there, since it says in the Bible, "Treat every man as a Brother" (Viola underscores "every" with a double line). On Sundays, passing by the white folks' church, where services began earlier than in the black churches, blacks sometimes heard them sing, "Will there be any stars in my crown?" The blacks often answered in song: "No not one, No not one."⁵³

God moves in a mysterious way, one might say, this difference to perform! In the course of the struggle, subaltern groups also appropriate weapons from the discourse of the dominant: from republican constitutions and universal declarations of human rights. Hence, the language of nationhood and of minority rights in much of the dalit and African American politics of the twentieth century, as dalit and African American thinkers explore and rewrite the history of labor and exploitation; the oppressions of caste and race, quite aside from the matter of economic production and distribution; the subordination and confinement of women; the challenges and prospects of different religions as well as political ideals and practices. This critical work underlines the process of the creation of specific historical confinements and oppressions, along with the accompanying ideologies and promises, identifications and ideals.

The body of the subaltern comes to be scripted in a new way in the articulation of difference. Recall Baby Kamble's comment on how the dalit struggle "yielded up three jewels – humanity, education and the religion of the Buddha. ... The flame of Bhim started burning in our hearts. We began to walk and talk. We became conscious that we ... are human beings."⁵⁴ "Yielded" is an important word – and it applies to the "us" in this statement, the dalits, as well as to humanity, education and religion. The struggle yielded up the dalit community, a dalit politics, and the outlines of a dalit future: not in the sense of an already existing community coming to consciousness of itself, but of historical conditions and political practice producing new senses of community and of difference.

For the difference articulated in the dalit, black or women's movement is not that of an already available culture or identity – the culture or identity of women or ex-Untouchables or people of African descent. What is involved rather is the *constitution* of difference, as Homi Bhabha has it, "a process of signification through which statements of culture or of culture differentiate, discriminate and authorize the production of fields of force, reference, applicability and capacity."⁵⁵ The facet of resistance, the "foreign accent" and "respectful disance"⁵⁶ found here is not the resistance of another "culture." It is, instead, the resistance of a different politics, the call for a differently imagined future.

This is not a politics that flows from cultural difference (somehow already constituted), but rather a *culture* that flows from political difference – and an alternative political perspective. Consider the political claim that inheres in the very act of naming a

Nation, "gay," "lesbian" (not to mention LGBTQ), and for that matter even "women." What this signals is the history and politics of a *becoming*; and with that, the search for an ethics – a position from which to act without fear, to demand one's rights, to live. An ethic for the times. A call for "simple faith and reverence" in place of "a dusty desert of dollars and smartness"; and for "Gautama's *dharma*," in which men and women, lord and peasant, upper caste and lower caste, Gentile and Jew, Hindu and Muslim, "all God's Chillins," may freely "walk and talk."

Notes

- 1 I am grateful to participants in meetings at Banaras Hindu University, Columbia University and Oberlin College, where earlier versions of this essay were presented, and to Rashmi Bhatnagar, William E. Connolly, Lynne Huffer, Colin Johnson, Bruce Knauft, Ruby Lal, Jonathan Prude, Gayatri Spivak, Ruth Vanita and Milind Wankar for detailed comments on an earlier draft.
- 2 Gyanendra-Pandey, ed., *Subaltern Citizens and Their Histories: Investigations from India and the USA* (London, 2010).
- 3 Robin D. G. Kelley, *Race Rebels: Culture, Politics and the Black Working Class* (New York, 1996), 6, for Kelley and Painter quotes; Jacqueline Jones, *Labor of Love, Labor of Sorrow: Black Women, Work and the Family from Slavery to the Present* (New York, 1986), 330.
- 4 The words in quotes are from Julia Kristeva, in Toril Moi, ed., *The Kristeva Reader* (New York, 1986), 37, and Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author" (1968), in Barthes, *Image-Music-Text* (London, 1977), 146.
- 5 Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (New York, 1989), *passim*; Sander L. Gilman, *Difference and Pathology* (Ithaca NY, 1985), 35; Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, eds., *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* (Urbana IL, 1988); and *idem*, in *Other Worlds: Essays in Cultural Politics* (New York, 1988), *passim*.
- 6 Elizabeth Grosz, "Derrida, Irigaray, and Deconstruction," *Intervention: Revolutionary Marxist Journal*, vol. 20 (1986): 72.
- 7 Spivak, in *Other Worlds*, 206–7; and Darius, Sara and Stefan Jonsson, "An Interview with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak," in *Boundary*, vol. 2 (1993): 3.
- 8 Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider* (Berkeley CA, 1984, 2007), 122; see also 112 and *passim*.
- 9 Joan W. Scott, "Deconstructing Equality-versus-Difference," *Feminist Studies*, 14, 1 (1988): *passim*.
- 10 There is much writing on this theme. For one important example, see Hannah Arendt, *The Jewish Writings*, edited by Jerome Kohn and Ron Feldman (New York, 2007). Aarun Muti, *Enlightenment in the Colony: The Jewish Question and the Crisis of Postcolonial Culture* (Princeton NJ, 2007) provides a postcolonial elaboration, focused on the question of Muslims in South Asia, 51 and *passim*.
- 11 I should explain why the laboring poor do not appear as a central instance here. While they were long categorized as "different" (in being "dangerous classes," physically and mentally wanting or even deformed, almost a different species of being), the working classes have never been described as a "minority," except when the reference is to sections of them defined in ethnic terms. More importantly, laboring people have claimed sameness, rather than difference, as the ground of their politics, except in so far as they present themselves as ethnic, caste or racial communities (Irish, Italians, Hispanics, dalits, blacks, Protestant, Hindu, etc.) and share the same structures of prejudice as other classes.

- 13 *Ibid.*, 11.
 14 *Ibid.*, 13.
 15 On the concept of "routine violence," see Gyanendra Pandey, *Routine Violence. Nations, Fragments, Histories* (Stanford CA, 2006), *passim*.
 16 See, for example, Babooji Ambekar, *Writings and Speeches* [hereafter BAWs], IX, 181, 190, XVII, Pt 3, 418; and Vol. I, 368; Eleanor Zelliot, *From Untouchable to Dalit: Essays on the Ambedkar Movement* (Delhi, 1996), 97; Seelhar Bandhopadhyay, "Transfer of Power and the Crisis of Dalit Politics in India, 1945–47," *Modern Asian Studies*, 34, 4 (2000): 903, 906.
 17 BAWs, IX, 68.
 18 BAWs, XIV, 270–71 and 1162.
 19 Zelliot, *From Untouchable to Dalit*, 206.
 20 "India and the pre-requisites of communism," p. 8 of Ambedkar, *Collected Works* CD (compiled by Anand Telumbe).
 21 "Revolution and Counter-revolution in Ancient India," p. 32 of Pt II of Telumbe CD.
 22 "What is Saddhanma?" BAWs, XI, 302; and "Revolution and Counter-revolution in Ancient India," p. 57 of Pt II of Telumbe CD.
 23 B. R. Ambedkar, *The Untouchables: Who They Were and why They Became Untouchables* (1948; Shrawasti, 1977), 204.
 24 D. R. Nagaraj, *The Flaming Feet: A Study of the Dalit Movement in India* (Bangalore, 1993), 58.
 25 Introduction to Pandey, ed., *Southern Citizens and Their Histories*, 3.
 26 For some important discussions of Ambedkar's reinterpretation of Buddhism, see Valentin Rodrigues, "Buddhism, Marxism and the Concept of Emancipation in Ambedkar," in Peter Robb, ed., *Dalit Movements and the Meaning of Labour in India* (Delhi, 1993), 299–338; Surendra Jondhale and Johannes Belz, eds., *Reconstructing the World*. B. R. Ambedkar and Buddhism in India (Delhi, 2004); A. K. Narain and D. C. Ahir, eds., *Dr. Ambedkar, Buddhism and Social Change* (Delhi, 1994); Dehiani Anupama Rao, *The Caste Question. Postcolonial Perspectives* (Delhi, 2005), ch. 7; 2009), esp. ch. 3.
 27 E.g. studies by Eleanor Zelliot, Adle Fiske and Surendra Jondhale, cited in John C. B. Webster, *Religion and Dalit Liberation. An Examination of Perspectives* (Delhi, 1999), 84 and 88.
 28 Cited in Eleanor Zelliot, "New Voices of the Buddhists of India," in Narain and Ahir, eds., *Ambedkar, Buddhism and Social Change*, 196. See also the poems by Daya Pawar and Nandedo Dhasal, and Zelliot's commentary on them, on p. 203.
 29 Urmila Pawar, *Arydhan* (Mumbai, 2003), 90–93. I have relied on Maya Pandit's translation of these passages, in Sharmila R. egs., *Writing Caste/Writing Gender* (Delhi, 2006), 285–88, with minor additions and emendations in the light of the original Marathi.
 30 Baby Kamble, *The Prisons We Book* (Chennai, 2008), 122.
 31 W. E. B. Du Bois, *The Souls of Black Folk* (New York, 1969), 45.
 32 For the wider context, and a powerful critique of the common sense of black/white relations in America, see Jack D. Forbes, *Africans and Native Americans: The Language of Race and the Evolution of Red-Black Peoples* (Urbana IL, 1993).
 33 hooks, *Ain't I a Woman* (Boston, 1981), 122.
 34 Jones, *Labor of Love*, 9.
 35 *Ibid.*, 316.
 36 hooks, *Ain't I a Woman*, 159.
 37 Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 112; Bethel cited in hooks, *Ain't I a Woman*, 152.
 38 hooks notes that the common comparison of "women" and "blacks" in white feminist critiques of American history serves to exclude black women from consideration. Even feminists like Helen Hacker and Catherine Stimpson use "women" to refer to white women and "black" to refer to black men, she argues, and others ("including even some black people") make the same assumption; *ibid.*, 140.
 39 Lorde, *Sister Outsider*, 144.
 40 Hine Sight, *Black Women and the Re-construction of American History* (Brooklyn NY, 1994), xxiii.
 41 *Ibid.*, 41.
 42 "The fourth theme has been problematic," writes Hine somewhat problematically; *ibid.*, 51.
 43 *Ibid.*, 38, 51, 52.
 44 Italy and Germany had been unified; Japanese nationalism was in the ascendancy; a regime of Poor Laws (to protect all the nation's people) was well established in Britain and elsewhere; and even as European (and American) imperialism extended its sway in Africa and Asia, the idea of the self-determination of nations was gaining ground.
 45 *Soul*, 52.
 46 D. G. Tendulkar, *Mahatma: Life of M. K. Gandhi*, vol. 4 (New Delhi, 1960), 41.
 47 BAWs, 404.
 48 *Ibid.*, 404–5.
 49 Du Bois, *Soul*, 102–3; repeated 60 years later in *The Autobiography of W. E. B. Du Bois* (New York, 1968), 120 (emphasis mine).
 50 Du Bois, *Autobiography*, 120.
 51 Kirtory University Manuscripts and Rare Book Library, Viola Andrews collection, Ms 813, Box 17, FF 7 and 8; and Box 21, FF 8, for this and the next paragraph.
 52 Andrews collection, Box 18, FF 3.
 53 Andrews collection, Box 17, FF 7; also FF 8, 9, 10, 12.
 54 Baby Kamble, *Prisons*, 122.
 55 Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London, 1994), 34.
 56 Cf. Doni Sommer, "Resisting the Heart: Mercurio, Morrison, and Incompetent Readers," in Amy Kaplan and Donald E. Pease, eds., *Cultures of United States Imperialism* (Durham NC, 1993), 407–32.