

Unsettling Racisms

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OVER THE LAST FEW DECADES, MY WORK HAS BEEN ANIMATED BY THE FUNDAMENTAL QUESTION, HOW CAN WE MAKE STRANGE THE universalist claims or assumptions of the epistemologies with which we work in order to reveal their cultural specificity? It is a question that also emerges in connection with modes of racialization. Thus, one should not simply compare types of racialization, as though they were commensurable, but ask what one can do to show the work these concepts perform in relation to specific histories and languages. My own familiar methods of articulating processes of racialization became thoroughly destabilized on a recent visit to India, where the functions of caste appeared to trump questions of racialization in critical discussions. But before entering this minefield of complexities and contradictions, let me summarize the previous work with which I've been associated.¹

The critical categories that appear to dominate work on modes of racialization are mobilized with reference to African Americans and cannot be used to illuminate every type of situation. For example, debates in settler colonies, such as Canada and Australia, are more concerned with the destabilization of hegemonic structures by Indigeneity. What might it mean to use Indigeneity as a way to interrogate universalist positions and the defining conditions of being human, at least provisionally? Ernesto Laclau's useful caution suggests why this interrogation is necessarily provisional: "If democracy is possible, it is because the universal has no necessary body and no necessary contents; different groups, instead, compete between themselves to temporarily give to their particularisms a function of universal representations" (367). The strategy is to have those usually marginalized take up the universalist epistemological position. David Roediger's important collection of essays *Black on White* assigns this role to African Americans, but in the settler colonies it has more recently been taken up by Indigenous critics. For example, the Australian scholar Aileen Moreton-Robinson states, "In academia it is rarely considered that Indigenous people are extremely

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knowledgeable about whites and whiteness” (85). This sentiment echoes throughout the essays collected by Roediger, where the “white problem” is anatomized in multiple and devastating ways by black scholars.

In her contribution to *Whitening Race*, a collection of essays she recently edited, Moreton-Robinson looks at whiteness in Australia through prisms provided by debates in the United States in particular. She identifies whiteness as the implicit norm of knowledge, functioning as an a priori epistemology. She suggests as well that globalization is increasingly underpinned by the notion of whiteness as a universal—indeed, a condition for being human. Her argument derives from the work of Warren Montag, who has examined the history of whiteness in the context of eighteenth-century colonialism. As Montag puts it, “To be white is to be human, and to be human is to be white. In this way, the concept of whiteness is deprived of its purely racial character at the moment of its universalization, no longer conceivable as a particularistic survival haunting the discourse of universality but, rather, as the very form of universality itself” (285). In the light of this history, to uncouple whiteness from conceptualizations of the universal takes a considerable effort. In settler colonies a focus on Indigeneity complicates interpellations of whiteness.²

Moreton-Robinson takes up Laclau’s challenge to deny any one group privileged access to universalism by interrogating non-Indigenous researchers of Indigeneity (for all their sympathetic and postcolonial credentials) about the place of whiteness in their work. She questions them concerning their nonuniversalist particularism since they themselves do not make this component visible in their analyses or inescapable in their research. She accomplishes this by assigning them to a particularism rather than taking for granted that they occupy the position of the universal. Clearly they often remain blind to their own assumptions and perspectives

in this regard. Bonita Lawrence and Enakshi Dua pursue a comparable strategy in the Canadian context when they argue in an influential essay that “critical race and post-colonial scholars have systematically excluded ongoing colonization from the ways in which racism is articulated. This has erased the presence of Aboriginal peoples and their ongoing struggles for decolonisation . . .” (130). Their essay includes a discussion of the complicity of “visible minorities” whose voices dominate the field of antiracist studies but who in their antiracist analyses do not necessarily acknowledge the ways in which they are beneficiaries of colonialism. Critiques like those of Lawrence and Dua are important when the formerly marginalized claim political and cultural franchises, but one also needs to take into account how different subjects or groups in colonial histories have a differentiated relation to both racism and whiteness (Gunew 33–51). Collapsing all antiracist groups may facilitate other reifications (e.g., about who is white, European, or of the West) instead of the proliferation of competing claims described by Laclau or may produce assumptions that some positions are off-limits to critical scrutiny.

Questions of Indigeneity are coupled with other forms of marginalization in India, since Indigenous groups there, known as the Scheduled Tribes (also as *adivasis*), are often linked with the Scheduled Castes (also referred to as *dalits* or, in an earlier era, as untouchables).³ Some of the controversies surrounding these terms in Indian society surfaced on the occasion of the United Nations’ World Conference against Racism, Racial Discrimination, Xenophobia and Related Intolerance held in Durban, South Africa, in 2001. Debates proliferated about whether one could speak of the caste system in the same ways as one did of racial regimes elsewhere.⁴ Some suggested that while race was a biological category, caste was social (Béteille), but numerous critics pointed out that the biological underpinnings of race have systematically been discredited (Oom-

men).⁵ Others argued that the most pertinent point was that caste discrimination shared many commonalities with racism (Omvedt).

While these debates have one kind of purchase in the domain of global human rights, they speak to other kinds of investments in cultural studies. Using the perceived incommensurabilities of the caste system in cultural analysis, Debjani Ganguly suggests that caste (usually associated with being outside modernity and an impediment to its achievement) can help unlock or unravel prescriptive and oversimplified versions of modernity constructed by Western discourses and epistemological categories. Ganguly emphasizes that she by no means wishes to deny the oppressiveness of the caste system but that she attempts to use its complexities as a way of making Western constructs of modernity strange. “My purpose in dealing with caste . . . is to see in caste a continuation of a life-form on the subcontinent that one and a half centuries of colonial rule, and the forces of global capitalist modernity that such a rule brought in its wake, have been unable to wipe out” (2). In evoking complexities beyond the abstractions of social science, Ganguly uses the concept of affective histories, comprising attempts to narrate the everyday material realities of living in the caste system. Her examples are taken from the writings of the subaltern historian Ranajit Guha and the novelist Arundhati Roy, among others. Ganguly analyzes the ways in which Guha brings the abstract and denuded language of a legal document to life novelistically and how aesthetic dimensions help the ethical enterprise she discerns in Roy’s work. One issue to ponder is the degree to which the affective is largely defined according to Western parameters—be they the “psy” disciplines or Western philosophy.⁶ The work of suggesting alternative taxonomies of emotions and feelings, particularly in their public forms, is in its early stages.⁷

This approach cannot help speaking for subaltern realities. Unlike Gayatri Spivak

in her scrupulous mediation of Mahasveta Devi’s work (Preface and Afterword), Guha and Roy construct the inner lives of abjected subalterns, who are traditionally not credited with interiority.⁸ Giving voice to the silenced subaltern has been a widespread and somewhat frenzied project ever since Spivak published her much misunderstood essay “Can the Subaltern Speak?” Many initial commentators interpreted the essay as a further silencing of subalterns, whereas Spivak’s point is that subalterns may well speak but are not necessarily heard unless they are mediated by nonsubalterns.⁹ Spivak suggests that the notion of ethical singularity provides a productive way to negotiate the question of Indigeneity in relation to Indian tribal subjects: “No amount of raised consciousness fieldwork can ever approach the painstaking labor to establish ethical singularity with the subaltern” (Preface xxiv).¹⁰ Elsewhere she describes ethical singularity by saying that “without the mind-changing one-on-one responsible contact, nothing will stick” (*Critique* 383).¹¹ Some of the participants in the deadlocked debates conducted in the settler colonies might find it helpful to consider the caste-race discussions in India since the propensity to homogenize and to represent (in both senses, depicting and speaking for) those who are marginalized continues to be a dominant element in such discussions in the settler colonies.

NOTES

1. I am mindful of entering new territory here and am grateful to Malashri Lal, with whom this conversation began, to Mridula Nath Chakraborty and Gautam Chakrabarti for their advice in my early discussions, and to Priti Singh for continuing dialogue. The errors are my own.

2. Aotearoa (New Zealand) is another case in point, and analyses of the meanings of “Pakeha” have implications for my contentions.

3. “Scheduled Castes (SCs) and Scheduled Tribes (STs) are Indian communities that are explicitly recognized by

the Constitution of India as requiring special support to overcome centuries of discrimination by mainstream Hindu society. SCs/STs together comprise over 24% of India's population, with SC at over 16% and ST over 8% as per the 2001 Census; this proportion has remained fairly stable for many decades. The Scheduled Caste peoples are also known as Dalits; Scheduled Tribe people are also referred to as Adivasis ("Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes"). This neat description belies the reality that all these terms are highly contested and that who belongs (or not) in these categories is a complex matter. The role played by British colonialism in formulating these taxonomies further complicates them (Dirks).

4. These debates are canvassed in a recent collection edited by Thorat and Umakant. Interestingly, the *dalits* from India and Nepal collaborated with the *buraku* from Japan. The official Indian governmental position at the time argued that caste was not race and was a matter internal to India.

5. Sabir points out that the distinction between "racialists," who believe race to be a biologically useful category, and racists, who believe in racial hierarchy, cannot be sustained and that there is no genetic evidence for the racialist position. He also disputes the notion that there is any biological evidence for caste.

6. Affect theory could be described as an attempt to analyze and theorize the complex field of emotions and the ways in which they shuttle between private and public realms, between biology and abstract philosophical categories. See, e.g., Ahmed; Brennan; Clough with Halley; Massumi.

7. In 2006 I coordinated a workshop and seminar titled "Decolonizing Affect Theory" at the University of British Columbia. The scholars involved in this project had all worked on affect theory but most had little opportunity to look comparatively at structures of feeling beyond European categories. Nineteen scholars (including postdoctoral and doctoral students) held monthly meetings, starting January 2006, in which we shared each other's projects and read pertinent theoretical material. In June we conducted a three-day symposium in which we presented our projects and to which we invited experts in the field, including Sara Ahmed. The process was captured to some degree in a DVD entitled *Feeling Multicultural: Decolonizing Affect Theory*.

8. My sense is that Ganguly's arguments about *dalit* literature frame it ethnographically (and even sociologically, in spite of her stated aims in the book) rather than aesthetically, which differs from her analysis of Guha and Roy.

9. See Spivak's later comments on the reception of this essay (*Critique* 269–311).

10. See also Spivak, *Other Asias*, for further comments on the ethics of working with tribal groups.

11. Spivak goes on to give an example of how this one-on-one relationship is often displaced in the work of Euro-

American feminists who mediate the words of activists in the South but fail to recognize their theoretical sophistication (386–87). Critics have suggested that Spivak's use of the concept of ethical singularity to some degree constitutes a dialogue with the work of Emmanuel Levinas, especially his influential formulations of the other.

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