

TAKE YOUR GEOGRAPHY AND TRACE IT

The Cosmopolitan Aesthetics of W. E. B. DuBois and Dhan Gopal Mukerji

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aesthetics

anti-racism

anticolonialism

cosmopolitanism

DuBois, W.E.B

ethics

Glissant, Édouard

Mukerji, Dhan Gopal

poetics of relation

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The twentieth century's long list of connections underneath the colour line, dubbed provocatively (if sometimes ahistorically) 'cosmopolitanism', reveals a network of international interlocutors spanning India and the United States during the interwar period. This essay reads Dhan Gopal Mukerji's semi-autobiographical Caste and Outcast (1923) alongside W. E. B. DuBois's fictional Dark Princess (1928), in relation to Édouard Glissant's Poetics of Relation (1997). DuBois and Mukerji, throughout their career, were centrally concerned with developing aesthetic protocols to correspond to a more cosmopolitan, globally just politics: a project that they share at the intersections of anti-racist and anticolonial struggles during the interwar period. I suggest here that specific attention to errantry of transnational movement, which structures both books across their respective genres, undergirds a shared aesthetic project. Such transnational circuits are the basis, for Glissant, of a poetics of relation; an errant way of being in the world. Reading Caste and Outcast and Dark Princess together (and in the context of the global history of anti-racist and anticolonial solidarities) offers us an aesthetics of cosmopolitanism available in the interwar period. By reading these writers together, this essay illuminates the aesthetic lineaments of this cosmopolitanism, fundamentally organized around errancy, historical injustice and relations with Others.

I am one who tells the truth and exposes evil and seeks with Beauty and for Beauty to set the world right. That somehow, somewhere eternal and perfect Beauty sits above Truth and Right I can conceive, but here and now and in the world in which I work they are for me unseparated and inseparable. (DuBois 1986: 995)

In 1925 the editors of the popular US magazine *Forum* posed a lofty question to the periodical's contributors: 'What is Civilization?' they asked. The Great War had renewed the urgency of asking such a question, the editors believed, and it was time to incorporate contributions from around the world.

The collection of responses, published the following year, poses the titular question again, reframed by the prefatory imperatives of Professor Willem Van Loon:

When it comes to a new civilization, that shall suit this strangely assorted mass of humanity, we need not be shy about borrowing. But before all things, we should not hesitate to discard.

For the future depends much more upon that which we shall throw over-board as futile, non-essential and harmful, than upon those elements which we intend to retain.

The chance of war has given us an opportunity to begin afresh.

May the Lord have mercy upon us if we choose wrong once more. (Maeterlinck et al. 1926: 14–15)

Dhan Gopal Mukerji writes the first essay in the collection, 'The Answer of India', about his return to India in 1923 to visit his brother. An unnamed US friend, convinced of the superiority of western culture, accompanies Mukerji to Benares. The two visit various townspeople, who each contribute to a long list of Indic accomplishments (the most recent of which is M. K. Gandhi). India, Mukerji argues via his Benares host (quoted here), offers civilization an appreciation of difference:

The two things that the West will do well to study in India is inclusiveness of mind, heart, and soul! Respect for all races and all truths, and the realization of that inward Repose which 'achieves more than any movement'. (Maeterlinck et al. 1926: 38–9)

W. E. B. DuBois follows with his response, 'The Answer of Africa', an account of his travels through West Africa. A different itinerary emerges

from DuBois's itinerary around Liberia. Among the Vai villages, DuBois rediscovers the villages in Tennessee where he once served as a schoolteacher. Traversing the Atlantic Ocean and Liberia at once, DuBois reminds us of the thousands of forced itineraries made before him. The African contribution to civilization was – and is – US music:

It is a new and mighty art which Africa gave America and America is giving the world. It has circled the world, it has set hundreds of millions of feet a-dancing, – it is a 'new' and 'American' art which has already influenced all music and is destined to do more. (Maeterlinck et al. 1926: 55)

The circulation of music across the Atlantic Ocean and its role in black expressive culture, as DuBois had shown in *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903), had already begun to shift civilization from below.

Unlike the other contributors, Mukerji and DuBois only barely respond to the question originally posed by the editors. Many contributors from the United States used their space to consign things to the rubbish bin; other contributors simply promoted aspects of various civilizations. Mukerji and DuBois's tangential answers, on the other hand, suggest a slant take on the task outlined by Van Loom, and thus begin to articulate a different project altogether.

This textual interchange in the pages of *Forum* is indicative of a larger project that unites the two thinkers throughout their careers. This essay puts the two writers back in conversation in order to assess better the aesthetic and political contributions of their work. Consequently, it reads Dhan Gopal Mukerji's semi-autobiographical *Caste and Outcast* (1923) alongside W. E. B. DuBois's fictional *Dark Princess* (1928). By reading these two writers together, this essay illuminates the aesthetic lineaments of Afro-Asian solidarity, extensively catalogued by historians of South Asia and the South Asian diaspora (Bald 2013; Slate 2011; Ahmad 2009; Mullen 2003; Prashad 2002).

The twentieth century's long list of connections underneath the colour line, dubbed provocatively (if sometimes ahistorically) 'cosmopolitanism', reveals a network of international interlocutors spanning India and the United States during the interwar period. Such lists, though crucial to reframing nationalist accounts of independence and civil rights movements, nevertheless frequently (to borrow a phrase somewhat out of context) 'surrender the political to the joylessness of a utilitarian dispensation' (Gandhi 2006: 176). Closer analysis of Mukerji and DuBois's work, instead, reveals a shared attention to developing, from beneath a global history of injustice, aesthetic protocols to correspond to a more *fully* cosmopolitan politics in its time.

DuBois and Mukerji, throughout their career, were centrally concerned with developing aesthetic protocols to correspond to a more cosmopolitan, globally just politics: a project that they share at the intersections of anti-racist and anticolonial struggles during the interwar period. DuBois's *Criteria of Negro Art* (1926) and Mukerji's introduction to *A Son of Mother India Answers* (1928) share a concern for the political power of aesthetic representation. *Dark Princess* and *Caste and Outcast* illustrate these concerns in practice. In their shared fundamental structure of errancy and international circulation, the two works suggest a possible aesthetic for the political project of a new cosmopolitan politics.

Reading *Caste and Outcast* and *Dark Princess* together (and in the context of the global history of anti-racist and anticolonial solidarities) offers us an aesthetics of cosmopolitanism available in the interwar period. I suggest here that specific attention to errantry of transnational movement, which structures both books across their respective genres, undergirds a shared aesthetic project. Such transnational circuits are the basis, for Édouard Glissant (1997), of a poetics of relation; an errant way of being in the world.

West Africa, Martinique, Mississippi

For Glissant, errancy emerges from the 'abyss' of history: the horror of the transatlantic slave trade. Glissant links the 'exceptional' atrocities across the Atlantic to remind us, as his epigraph from Derek Walcott succinctly does, that 'the sea is history'. The history of the slave trade, excepted from history in the exceptional spaces of sea and plantation, becomes the singular historical trauma for a global modernity. History and experience, for Glissant, is made possible by the abyss of the ocean, and 'this experience of the abyss can now be said to be the best element of exchange' (1997: 8). Rather than identifying an itinerary with a beginning and an end, the middle passage redirects our focus towards the importance of movement between spaces, and the productive messy confluences that are produced in the process.¹

Indeed, because the ship – or, precisely, the slave ship – is the fundamental technology of modernity (Baucom 2005; Glissant 1997; Gilroy 1993), it is in its oceanic paths that we must search for the circuits that make modernity a global phenomenon. If cosmopolitanism is an 'ethics of global interestedness ... [and] an interested philosophy of history' (Baucom 2005: 311), it is to these abysmal circuits that we must return.

Glissant recovers from this history the possibility of 'errancy', a poetics of movement and, consequently, an interest in the history of interaction across the world. Glissant's analysis reveals the aesthetic potential of a forced

1 Glissant is fascinated quite centrally with the creolization produced in these spaces of interaction, as well as the consequently tested contours of the French language. I am most interested here, like Baucom (2005), in his focus on movement and his concept of *donner-avec*, to 'give-on-and-with', as a cosmopolitan claim.

cosmopolitanism. This forced cosmopolitanism becomes, in its recovery, an ethical project ‘rooted’ in the shared histories of oppression and injustice across the world, from (in the cases of the writers under analysis) West Africa and South Asia to the plantations of Mississippi and fields of the Pacific Northwest.

For Glissant, these conditions of rerouting or errancy produce political strength in the ‘multiple relationships with the Other’ (1997: 16), or, in other words, a Poetics of Relation. The titular phrase invokes a tightly tethered aesthetic and ethical project: an ethical project with necessarily aesthetic lineaments.

Errancy, then, ‘names a sort of roving global politics of interestedness, a total cosmopolitan practice of holding ourselves to the fate of one another’ (Baucom 2005: 314). If this is the case, a consequent poetics of the relations produced under the conditions of errancy highlights ‘roving’: practices of itinerancy and a new cartographic imagination that make historical global relations visible.

Glissant’s aesthetic/political call often resides, productively if uneasily, in the murky terrain between the descriptive and the normative. On one hand, he describes a global modernity and an errancy made possible by historical horrors; on the other, he demands political and aesthetic relations made crucial by an orientation to those humans yet excepted from history. Mukerji and DuBois, read under Glissant’s influence, help us navigate this apparent divide: their work pushes us to recognize how the present is fundamentally structured by its abysmal history, and the necessary political orientations that we must, by acting within the present, sustain in relation with the past. In this sense, I suggest we read *Caste and Outcast* and *Dark Princess* as fundamentally structured through their narrative itinerancy, and articulate a set of aesthetic practices to correspond to this consequently more rooted errancy and cosmopolitanism. Glissant helps here to draw out the aesthetic contribution of DuBois and Mukerji’s work to anticolonial and anti-racist forms of interwar cosmopolitanism. At the same time, we can trace how DuBois and Mukerji offer a full sense of Glissant’s aesthetic demand: theirs is a commitment to the exceptions of history, consciously written under the contingency of the global interwar present.

The horrors of the Great War would push many thinkers to reconsider, from its ashes, the possibility of new ethics for an indelibly changed world. It had become clear that such an ethical project must come from elsewhere beyond Europe: the editors of *Forum* in 1925 had made this clear; in 1935, Edmund Husserl diagnosed the crisis of the European Man. Indian soldiers in the First World War, writing home, reported that they were being shown outstanding hospitality by French and British families (Gandhi 2007). Under these conditions, Indian soldiers expressed a vision of cosmopolitanism that

included, quite centrally, the possibilities of errancy from (and within) a forced itinerary.

Mukerji and DuBois, writing after the war, offer us a set of possible aesthetic protocols for this errant circulatory cosmopolitanism. They do not offer us yet another modified cosmopolitanism – vernacular, partial, coloured, actually existing, and so on – but rather a *total* cosmopolitanism (Baucom 2005: 314), a *total* relation (Glissant 1997: 27), as a difficult, normative political and aesthetic project. Their project, rooted in errancy and written from the viewpoint of the historically abysmal, is far from ‘bland, pious, or powerless’ (Robbins 2012: 30). Instead, theirs is a cosmopolitanism inherently and simultaneously connected to the slave trade, precarious labour *and* the continuing horrors of racism and colonialism in the global interwar conjuncture.

Berlin, Chicago, Richmond

Dark Princess, which was published to tepid critical response in 1928, nevertheless remained DuBois’s favourite of his works. The adventures of Matthew Towns, the novel’s protagonist, form the structure of the novel’s four chapters. In ‘The Exile’ Matthew finds himself leaving New York for Berlin, where he meets the eponymous Princess, Kautilya, and a cast of representatives from ‘the darker nations’. The second chapter begins with Matthew back in the United States, taking a job as a Pullman porter. Princess Kautilya returns, *deus ex machina*, convincing Matthew to foil a vengeful plot to derail the train. Matthew is jailed for his association with the plot, but released under the political sway of a corrupt politician and his drab assistant. Under their leadership, Matthew becomes involved in Chicago politics, only to give up his political success when Princess Kautilya reemerges. In the final chapter, ‘The Maharaja of Bwodpur’, Kautilya shares her adventures in the United States, and Matthew flies to his mother’s home in Virginia to marry the princess, who has given birth to their son.

Although it certainly foregrounds an exotic view of South Asia (and the Orient in which it is a part), simply to dismiss *Dark Princess* as an Orientalist text misses the ways in which it was the product of DuBois’s participation in an international network of activists. Even if awkwardly so, the novel carries with it the voices of DuBois’s Indian friends in the United States and South Asia. Indian anticolonial leader Lala Lajpat Rai provided editorial assistance from abroad, and Dhan Gopal Mukerji suggested changes from an early manuscript draft.² The novel, published while DuBois was still the editor of *The Crisis*, marks in fiction what DuBois had accomplished during the 1910s and 1920s as an international figure. He attended the Universal Races

2 See the DuBois–Mukerji correspondence in the W. E. B. DuBois papers at the University of Massachusetts–Amherst, where DuBois admits to imagining the fictional Bwodpur as a combination of Jodhpur (India) and Nepal. As Aptheker (1974) notes, DuBois meticulously researched all four chapters in *Dark Princess*, especially to achieve the social realism of his chapter on Chicago.

3 Bhabha (2007) speculates that Kautilya is modelled loosely on Indian nationalist Madam Bhikaji Cama, who was active in Europe after leaving Bombay in 1902. In 1907, at the International Socialist Congress in Stuttgart, Cama famously unfurled the Indian national flag. Later that year, she held a dinner party with Indian and Egyptian delegates at her house – perhaps later to be staged as Kautilya’s illicit dinner meeting at a Berlin hotel.

Conference in London in 1911, accompanied Rai on his tour of the United States during the First World War, visited Liberia in 1923, and had organized or attended Pan-African Congresses throughout the 1920s.³ At the time of the book’s publication, *The Crisis* had published letters from M. K. Gandhi, Rabindranath Tagore and C. F. Andrews. The work, like the messianic child born at its conclusion, is ‘something durable and entirely appropriate to troubled anticolonial times ... the internal differentiation of these multiplicities, their irreducible complexity ... made concrete’ (Gilroy 1993: 144).

Critics of the novel have struggled with its peculiar relationship to genre, as well as its place within DuBois’s larger internationalist political project (Ahmad 2002, 2009; Bhabha 2004; Lahiri 2010). Indeed, *Dark Princess* troubles easy categorization. Even its caveat of a subtitle, *A Romance*, fails to account for the gritty social realism of the penultimate chapter. Kautilya’s central role in the abrupt endings of chapters, as well as the narrative’s reliance on her for the production of the story itself, makes the Princess of Bwodpur similar to a Persian queen of Orientalist repute: Scheherazade. This is an allusion not lost on our protagonist: ‘Talk on, Scheherazade!’ Matthew proclaims in the final chapter (DuBois 1995: 221, 227). In any case, the structure of the novel’s itinerary is as unpredictable as Matthew’s own.

Indeed, one might as well begin with Matthew Towns’ response to an anonymous shipmate:

Where was he going? He glanced at the pale-faced man who asked him. ‘I don’t know,’ he answered shortly. The good-natured man stared, nonplussed. Matthew turned away. Where *was* he going? The ship was going to Antwerp. But that, to Matthew, was sheer accident. He was going *away* first of all. After that? Well, he had thought of France ... He would then go to Germany. From there? Well, there was Moscow ... Perhaps he would move on to the Near or Far East and find hard work and peace. At any rate he was going somewhere. (DuBois 1995: 5).

So much for foreshadowing – except, perhaps, that the proliferation of cities and locations should draw our attention to Towns’ openness to the world and the unpredictability of his transatlantic travel. It is a reverse direction from the itineraries his ancestors would have been forced to make – itineraries DuBois highlights in ‘The Answer of Africa’ and studied for his dissertation – and, though it is made freely in this iteration of history, it is nevertheless fraught with unknowing. Matthew’s refusal to know his itinerary highlights instead his willingness to be errant in the world as a political and ethical practice.

But Matthew’s fleeing isn’t entirely haphazard, either. Even if his itinerary is chaotic, it isn’t random. His errancy is rooted. It is rooted in the sense (for

Glissant and DuBois) that it is grounded in the exceptional events of history. Matthew's movement is rooted in the sense that it also reflects the political contingencies of transnational circulation in the 1920s, as well as DuBois's own travels in the decade. In this sense, DuBois's relation to history is structured by the contingencies of the present; indeed, *Dark Princess* lays bear how submarine history fundamentally shapes the present. In the context of DuBois's expansive corpus, *Dark Princess* is not a frivolous diversion into fiction but rather (like many critics have mentioned) part of a larger, radical aesthetic-political project.⁴ *Dark Princess* unifies the aesthetic practice of the creation of literary work with the political practice of radical internationalist, anti-racist and anticolonial thought. In this sense, Matthew Towns' itinerary marks in an aesthetic register the political practices and ethical concerns of interwar radical cosmopolitanism.

4 Among other essays, see 'The Talented Tenth' (1903) and 'Criteria of Negro Art' (1926), both in DuBois (1986).

The form of the novel, too, retains the intimate connection between history, aesthetics and a radical politics. There are only tenuous connections between the various locales in which Matthew finds himself, but they aren't entirely arbitrary, either. Matthew's travels are rooted among the loose patterns of transnational networks that mirrored the experiences of radical collective agitators in the early decades of the twentieth century. Matthew's itinerancy, in the model of a poetics of relation, aestheticizes and thus renders visible the global constellations of these activists.

Indeed, DuBois and Towns prize the movement – of passages, circuits and exchanges – between spaces above origins, destinations and the sessile. Of the lengthy descriptions in *Dark Princess* – of women, gritty urban Chicago, of Matthew's colleagues' exploits – nothing quite compares to the extended three-page description of Matthew's flight from Chicago to his mother's home in Richmond, Virginia. The flight's seven-hour duration allows Matthew to reflect on his own movement around the world (of which I offer a brief selection):

Below, the formless void of earth began to speak with the shades of shadows and flickering, changing lights. That cluster of little jewels that flushed and glowed and dimmed would be a town; that comet below was an express train tearing east; that blackness was a world of farms asleep ...

Suddenly the whole thing became symbolic. He was riding Life above the world. He was triumphant over Pain and Death ... He was flying above the world. He was flying to her. (DuBois 1995: 303–4)

However, Matthew does not escape his own history: as he flies, he remembers lynchings, the wailing of widows, his association with Miguel Perigua and Princess Kautilya. His itinerancy is marked, even from above the

earth, by its necessary relations to past *and* present others. Even though he tries to banish those thoughts from his memory, when he lands he catches a seat in a segregated car, becoming once again the exception of historical justice.

Dark Princess foregrounds the movement of its central characters and thus illustrates itineraries of anticolonial and anti-racist thought in the global 1920s. The book ends and begins en route, and Matthew is on the move for most of the novel – and it is only in these spaces of movement that Matthew finds aesthetic pleasure. Only in Chicago is he relatively sedentary, and he is repulsed by the ‘unnecessary dirt and waste – the ugliness of it all’ (DuBois 1995: 147). Indeed, when Kautilya rescues him from the Chicago political machine, they meet in an art gallery and escape to a forest north of the suburbs (1995: 239). Matthew’s cosmopolitan itinerary and Kautilya’s alternative geographies are only possible when fundamentally organized around the two characters’ own highly aestheticized movement across the world.

Dark Princess provides a dynamic geography of anticolonial/anti-racist thought based on these circuits of relation. Princess Kautilya maps a minor network of circulation for ‘the darker races’:

Think, Matthew, take your geography and trace it: from Hampton Roads to Guiana is a world of colored folk, and a world, men tell me, physically beautiful beyond conception; socially enslaved, industrially ruined, spiritually dead; but ready for the breath of Life and Resurrection. South is Latin America, east is Africa, and east of east lies my own Asia. Oh, Matthew, think this thing through. Your mother prophesies. We sense a new age. (DuBois 1995: 278)

Kautilya’s network provides a map of the world from below; it holds the radical possibility of rethinking an aestheticized cosmopolitanism from a different history. Like the poet whose ‘word leads from periphery to periphery ... [and] abolishes the very notion of center and periphery’ (Glissant 1997: 29), Kautilya’s aestheticized vision reroutes our imagination and renders peripheries into centres, ultimately undoing both. More precisely, it is the explicit articulation of the slippage between anticolonialism and anti-racism, a new political alignment to which DuBois characteristically gives an aesthetic judgement.

Kautilya’s maps parallel Matthew’s travels insofar as they draw out a set of political concerns across transnational spaces. Its alternative geopolitical configuration is an alternative cartography. Kautilya’s imagined maps aestheticize a cosmopolitan politics:

The black belt of the Congo, the Nile, and the Ganges reaches up by way of Guiana, Haiti, and Jamaica, like a red arrow, up into the heart of white America. Thus I see a mighty synthesis: you can work in Africa and Asia right here in America if you work in the Black Belt ... You may stand here, Matthew – here, halfway between Maine and Florida, between the Atlantic and the Pacific, with Europe in your face and China at your back ... and yet be in the Land of Blacks. (DuBois 1995: 286)

Kautilya's breezy assertion that 'Pan-Africa belongs logically with Pan-Asia' (DuBois 1995: 20) is made more concrete in this map.⁵

5 This would have also been a subtle critique of Marcus Garvey, with whose Pan-Africanist movement DuBois strongly disagreed. Garvey also serves as the model for Miguel Perigua, the violent agitator who plots to derail the train in the second chapter of *Dark Princess*.

It is a map created not by 'newspaper politics merely, but inner currents and whisperings, unpublished facts' (DuBois 1995: 20). This quieter and significantly more minor assemblage of actors retains its relation to those voices excepted from history. It is easy to see here the parallel relationship it has with Matthew's travels in Europe: Matthew's travels across the world in the four chapters of *Dark Princess* reflect the proliferation of prophesied maps and unknown itineraries that circulate with him. These maps and itineraries illustrate the circulation of the possibility of anticolonial/anti-racist politics towards a new cosmopolitanism. The philosophical itinerary Matthew sketches at the beginning of the novel is sketched by Kautilya at the end. As Ahmad (2002) notes, the US South and the Global South are provocatively muddled, drawing attention to their shared histories. The novel ends with the celebrated birth of an anticolonialist's and an anti-racist's child, affirming the necessity of Afro-Asian solidarity and 'multiple relations with the Other'.

Calcutta, Tokyo, San Francisco

6 Consequently, very little has been written about Mukerji's work. Gordon Chang's extensive research (published as the foreword in the 2002 edition of *Caste and Outcast*) has provided the most substantial biographical work on Mukerji's life.

Dhan Gopal Mukerji had been in the United States for thirteen years when he published *Caste and Outcast*, an account of his move from Bengal to California. The novel attempts to give a US audience a clearer account of life in India than other popular accounts. Mukerji believed his lifelong task was representing India for Americans, many of whom would not have the chance to visit. His books for children were bestsellers; *Gay-Neck: The Story of a Pigeon* won the esteemed Newbery Award in 1927. He was a popular public intellectual, advocating Indian independence, interracial dialogue and greater awareness of Indian philosophy. He sat on the board of the American League for Indian Freedom and corresponded regularly with Jawaharlal Nehru. His popularity in the 1920s was matched only by the obscurity into which he fell following his suicide in 1936.⁶

Most of his books for adults focus on life in modern India as it changed under and struggled against British rule. *Caste and Outcast* differs from his other published works, however, as it remains one of his few direct engagements with Indian–American life in literary form. ‘Caste’ forms the first half of the novel as an account of the author’s life in Bengal, and ‘outcast’ forms the second half after Mukerji moves to San Francisco. The novel ends with a reflection on life between India and the United States.

‘Caste’ marks Mukerji’s position in Bengal society: from the first line, the reader is aware of Mukerji’s particularity: ‘I am a Hindu of Brahmin parentage, and I was born and brought up in a small village near Calcutta’ (Mukerji 2002: 45). Mukerji’s mother instructs him in Hindu tradition, and he leaves school at age 11 to join a holy man. As a priest, he travels to Benares and the foothills of the Himalayas. He returns to become a priest near Calcutta, but leaves again to travel around India. He begins his studies at the University of Calcutta, but leaves to attend school in Tokyo, and, later, at the University of California-Berkeley.

‘Outcast’, then, marks Mukerji’s location within the United States in the 1910s. Although a wave of South Asian migration had preceded him, Mukerji’s arrival at Berkeley was a lonely one. As he begins his classes, he picks up odd domestic jobs for bosses who overwork and disrespect him. He makes friends with socialists and anarchists in the Bay Area, but grows disillusioned with their politics as he begins to gain a clearer sense of his own. He joins a group of South Asian field labourers for a summer’s work and acts as a cultural translator between visiting Christian missionaries and the Muslim workers. He serves unwittingly as a medium for a dubious spiritualist until he quits with perfect timing, right before police shut down the operation. The narrative then comes to an abrupt end: Mukerji, wandering the streets on New Year’s night, watches a man purchase a sex-worker with whom the author has just shared a meal. Mukerji realizes that life is a ‘sordid travesty’ (Mukerji 2002: 220) and solemnly faces east to think of India.

Within the first paragraph, we are warned of Mukerji’s temptation to abandon narrative in favour of ‘philosophizing’ and providing lengthy descriptions of others. Perhaps not warned, but rather enticed – indeed, Mukerji’s reflections on life in India and the United States are provocative and have been insightful for thinking about early (pre-1965) South Asian diaspora in the United States (Lahiri 2010; Elam 2013).

Rather than reading Mukerji for historical description (as some have tried to do), it seems more useful – and in line with Mukerji’s aesthetic project – to read his opening warning as an ethical provocation. As Purnima Mankekar and Akhil Gupta’s essay in the 2002 edition of *Caste and Outcast* suggests, ‘autobiography’ is a strange term for *Caste and Outcast*, though it certainly appears as one. But Mukerji himself almost disappears in the text, and refuses to write ‘in a manner consistent with the western idea of what a book

ought to be' (Mukerji 2002: 46). The memoir moves in bursts between sketches of action and descriptions of friends; the text highlights an interest in movement and juxtaposition of scenes. This refutation of genre, instead, orients Mukerji and *Caste and Outcast* towards a relation with others:

I saw faces, faces everywhere, and I always noticed the eyes ... There was a vast procession of ideals and desires moving before me as I watched these faces and behind each I caught the gleam of a thought and began to form an idea of the person himself. (Mukerji 2002: 46)

As an acknowledgement of the impossibility of writing an autobiography, this is certainly a provocative one.⁷ Mukerji's inability to write about himself without writing about the aesthetic relationship with everyone he encounters on his travels (in India and the United States) reveals a project of intimate interestedness in the Other.

Each chapter, from Benares to Berkeley, finds the young Mukerji in a new location or on his way to somewhere else. In India as well as in the United States the narrative hinges on the temporary job, the ephemerality of a late-night conversation, and unplanned travel. Especially in the United States, the loose affiliations of anarchists, socialists, Muslim labourers and student agitators are held together not merely by Mukerji himself but rather by his movement between them.

Like that of Matthew Towns, Mukerji's itinerary is chaotic and unpredictable, yet simultaneously grounded in the historical contingency of his precarious relationship to the United States in the 1910s and 1920s. Mukerji's literary errancy creates an alternative map that aligns poor South Asian labour in the US Pacific Northwest with socialists and spiritualists in San Francisco; casteism in Benares with racism in the Bay Area; and the geography of negotiations of the colour line by those who find themselves arbitrarily underneath it.

The epilogue, the last chapter in 'Outcast', is an extended reflection on Mukerji's life in the United States (one of the longest of his published career). His suggestion that 'a Hindu, who wants to find a complete antithesis to his race and culture, had better avoid Europe and come straight to America' (Mukerji 2002: 222) is not exactly a sales pitch. Antitheses, however, are never as radically opposed as they initially seem:

America is victorious, India is conquered. America is carefree. India is careworn. America lynches Negroes. India illtreats her untouchables. America is abyss-wombed. India has given birth to her abyss. America believes in herself. India is too old to believe in herself. India has caste. America aims at equality. Thus run the resemblances and differences between the two countries.

7 M. K. Gandhi's *Autobiography* (1922) also opens with a claim about the impossibility of writing an autobiography, but Gandhi's claim functions as a more essentialist claim about the genre and Indian identity.

8 This idea had been circulating in the United States and India throughout the 1910s. The term 'colour-caste' had been developed by sociologists working at Columbia University and the University of Chicago as a way of illuminating the structural functions of both race in the United States and caste in India. Rai (1916) provides an extended analysis of the term, and DuBois uses 'caste' to refer to race throughout his writings.

9 It is both the aligning of 'the East' with India, but *also* a reversal of directions. Mukerji also makes a point of facing the counterintuitive direction at the end of *My Brother's Facey*, when he sees the face of his brother (anticolonial agitator Jadugopal Mukherjee) while facing 'the western horizon' (Mukerji 1924: 367).

The differences are so extreme that the extremes must meet. Both India and America are mad. India has been mad with peace and America is mad with restlessness. It is this madness that has drawn me to them both. Europe is poor fare for my hungry Hindu soul. I want the fecundity of America. I cannot live twenty-four hours a day. I want to live two days in one. (Mukerji 2002: 223)

Mukerji's concern with US racial injustice is on tepid display here, but so too is his recognition that it parallels caste-based injustice in India.⁸

America's fecundity is important for Mukerji because:

America is a seed continent. All the world and all the nations are planting their best and their worst seed in this spring-smitten land. Asia has planted her mysticism, Europe has sown her seeds of diverse intellectual culture, and Africa has offered her innocence. (Mukerji 2002: 223)

Although this claim seems conservative or kitschy to contemporary readers, it would have been particularly controversial in the 1920s. Anti-miscegenation laws, restrictive immigration quotas and a growing nativist movement meant that entry into the 'melting pot' was still restricted to northwestern Europeans. Mukerji's claim, in 1923, that the United States was an amalgamation of influences from Asia and Africa would have been as radical as Kautilya's counter-geographies.

Mukerji's 'seed continent' is the product of multiple errancies, which Mukerji recognizes, even if he only partially acknowledges it in this section. The United States, in this sense, holds the possibility of a rooted (to fully align Mukerji's metaphor with Glissant's) politics of interestedness. It is cosmopolitanism available to (and from) those on whose backs 'the global' – and History itself – was made possible.

It is also worth noting Mukerji's strange decision to 'turn [his] face toward the East' to think of India (2002: 220) at the end of *Caste and Outcast*. It is not simply the tethered relationship of 'the East' and India. Standing by the Bay in San Francisco, Mukerji might have faced west for the straightest line to South Asia. Facing east, on the other hand – and comparing life in the United States to life in India – carries our line of vision to his relations with Others: to the race-based atrocities in the US South, the Atlantic Ocean and the Global South beyond it.⁹

Across the Black Waters

Despite their approach from two different genres, *Dark Princess* and *Caste and Outcast* both flirt with the boundaries of the travelogue. In response to

nineteenth-century travel writing (which focused on the colonial native's lack of mobility), Indian anticolonialists frequently used the travelogue form to reshape other genres, especially the autobiography. A reliance on conspicuous international travel not only undermines the fixity of colonized identities, but also produces what Majeed (2007) calls the 'postnational' form that anticolonial autobiographies frequently inhabited. DuBois and Mukerji's 'travel writing', especially in their contributions to *What is Civilization?*, both highlight the anxious tie between their own voluntary travel and the histories of involuntary migration of West Africans and South Asians before them.

In a similar way, Towns in *Dark Princess* and Mukerji in *Caste and Outcast* circulate chaotically in both registers: Towns voluntarily boards the ship to Europe, but finds that he has given himself over to the unpredictability of the Atlantic Ocean. Mukerji voluntarily boards ships bound for Tokyo and San Francisco, and finds himself working the fields as the forced Sikh labour that arrived before him. Both books offer an aesthetic account (via either fiction or memoir) of the 'postnational' identity that forms in the chaos of cosmopolitan travel.

Ahmad (2002) highlights the relationship between genre and geography in *Dark Princess*. She connects the social realism of the Chicago chapter with *Sister Carrie* and *The Jungle*; the mysticism of Princess Kautilya with Orientalist scholarship and literature; and the 'hazy agrarian motherland familiar' (Ahmad 2002: 776) sense of the US South with the Harlem Renaissance. The conflation of the US South and the Global South at the end of the novel only draws more attention to the relationship between aesthetic practice and grounded location in *Dark Princess*. The marked difference between genres draws attention to the aesthetic practices rooted in the histories of each location. Moreover, the differences draw our attention to the ways in which each genre is rooted in the historical specificities of race- and class-based injustice in each locale.

In their afterword to *Caste and Outcast* Mankekar and Gupta (2002) also draw attention to the relationship between geography and narrative tone. They rightly note the shift in authorial voice when Mukerji leaves Bengal for California. Mukerji's description of India is a wise, composed and balanced account of his travels within the country. When he arrives at Berkeley, however, Mukerji's narrator leaves the ship as an excitable naïf. In 'Outcast' the United States reveals itself as a constant surprise and a source of endless confusion. What happens in his transnational journey to make Mukerji suddenly immature? Mankekar and Gupta suggest that this switch represents the ways in which the immigrant must greet her new location as a child seeing the world for the first time. This strikes me as sentimental. Mukerji (somewhat exotically) reminds us in the epilogue that naivety is the tone appropriate to a 'spring-smitten' country. I suggest we read this change in

10 Indeed, 'Caste' is the only section in any of Mukerji's published works that features this authoritative tone. Mukerji structures even his later books about contemporary India as though he, with the reader, is discovering the country for the first time. It is unclear, for example, when Mukerji interviews Jawaharlal Nehru in *Disillusioned India* (1930), that the two men had been good friends. Nehru was the godfather of Mukerji's son.

narrative voice as Mukerji's shift from a self-centred biography to an awareness of his place in a larger global project of cosmopolitan interestedness.¹⁰

West Africa, France, Martinique, Mississippi. Benares, Calcutta, Tokyo, San Francisco. Berlin, Chicago, Richmond, Vai villages. Glissant's 'abyss' connects the world and tethers its history to submarine horrors. Like Punjabi labour before him, Mukerji's path connects cities across the Pacific Ocean; like the slave trade, DuBois's path stretches across the Atlantic. Reading Mukerji and DuBois together, and in relation to Glissant, renders in stark relief the shared aesthetic and political project of the writers. Neither DuBois nor Mukerji believes a shared interested cosmopolitanism is easy: Matthew Towns notes the 'color line within the color line' (DuBois 1995: 22) at the illicit dinner in Berlin, and Mukerji's juxtaposition of 'untouchables' and 'negroes' in his epilogue sits in the shadows of his privileged caste childhood. DuBois's offering to civilization for *Forum* is not simply carried along on the slave ships of the past, but is rather saturated with the submarine horrors of transatlantic history. Kautilya's beautiful maps reroute Matthew's imagination to the shared struggle of anticolonialism and anti-racism around the world; Mukerji's travels remind us of the history of forced itineraries that enable his own travels in the United States.

In October 1927 DuBois sent *Dark Princess* to Mukerji to receive feedback on the manuscript's accuracy. Mukerji responded quickly with only 'slight changes': 'Beyond that', he writes, 'I can't criticise your mss. nor alter [its facts]' (Mukerji to DuBois, 4 November 1927, University of Massachusetts-Amherst). Mukerji's response is curious, but it indicates a different orientation towards aesthetic representation – on the part of both writers. Perhaps Mukerji realized that *Dark Princess* is, as Rampersad (1976: 162) defensively notes, 'much more than a statement about aesthetics' – though it certainly is that, too. The representation of postnational travel in these two works suggests a shared project of realigning aesthetics to a political project: a total cosmopolitanism from below the colour line.

P. W. Wilson, writing for *The New York Times* (13 June 1926), was unimpressed with *What is Civilization?* He dismissed it as full of 'oriental smugness and occidental doubt'. Mukerji's piece is given particular scorn when Wilson writes that Mukerji's Swami must have been meditating among 'streets of the country running red with the blood of fanaticism' while justice is 'roughly denied to sixty million untouchables'. DuBois, on the hand, receives the only praise in the review: DuBois 'puts the case in prose that is often poetry, and with the dignity that is itself a demonstration of the rights of man', even though Africa remains 'deplorably arrested'.

Wilson takes the titles too literally. Mukerji's 'Answer of India' is discovered when he travels back to Benares, by ship, with a white American friend. DuBois's 'Answer of Africa' reveals itself fully only when African

music crosses over the Atlantic to the US South. In other words, Mukerji and DuBois sketch contributions to ‘a new civilization’ that refute their origins and forcefully avow their moments of movement, of errancy, of new relations.

DuBois and Mukerji participate in a shared conversation about the possibility of a politics intimately connected to the abysmal and the exceptional. Their literary work attempts, by way of its fundamental interest in itinerancy and alternative geographies, to offer an aesthetics of this total commitment to others. It is a cosmopolitanism rooted in the shared injustices of racism and colonialism, and it remains determinedly rooted to those injustices and histories even as it proposes a new civilization to US audiences.¹¹

Against the current proliferation of those ‘bland, pious, or powerless’ cosmopolitanisms, we might instead follow Glissant, DuBois and Mukerji and foreground errancy and rerouting for an ethics for their (and our) present. Taking their geography and tracing it, they illuminate a commitment to the world from the underside of its history. Their works are fundamentally structured by the errancy of travel. This errancy avows, quite centrally, the historical injustices that shape the contours of international circulation in the present. This errancy as a Poetics of Relation thus provides a historically specific aesthetic sense to a shared project of interwar cosmopolitanism.

11 In this sense, Glissant, Mukerji and DuBois are part of a long trajectory of anticolonial and postcolonial politics, made clearest by Fanon’s demand to ‘create a new man’ from ‘the wretched of the earth’.

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