

## Wrongs and Formations of Violent Identities: Theorizing Caste and Race

In theorizing caste and race, this chapter makes four claims about wrongs. First, wrongs have a ritualistic character. Second, they may be distinguished into two classes—brutal wrongs and everyday “ordinary” wrongs. Third, wrongs arise from and further propagate violent identities—that is, identities that are informed and formed by the absence of a critical examination of the social conditions out of which they emerge. Four, wrongs are socially conditioned corporeal habits. This fourth claim is implicit in this chapter; the next chapter makes this explicit and elaborates on it.

Before introducing the sections that enable the analyses of this chapter’s four claims, two instances from the US context I have personally witnessed allow me to situate this chapter. They help to describe wrongs; examine processes that inform and form human identity; interrogate the myriad ways in which agents are conditioned to remember (or not) wrongs; analyze the manner in which persons—especially those from dominant social locations—become either indifferent to or complicit in the perpetration of wrongs; and lift up the urgent need for interdisciplinary conversations between caste and race that revolve around the subject of remembrance of wrongs.

The first example occurs in academic conversations about India in which persons drop M.K. Gandhi’s name. Upon hearing this name-dropping, I often ask my interlocutors—this includes graduate students and professors—whether they know of B.R. Ambedkar. Most of them do not. Ambedkar was the Chairman of the Constituent Assembly that

drafted India's constitution. He was the most prominent ideological opponent to Gandhi. Ambedkar, a lawyer with a Ph.D., was and is a major Dalit icon whose statues—a mark of honor in India—most likely outnumber Gandhi's. In the face of caste-based discrimination, which he argued as being inextricably tied to dominant<sup>1</sup> Hindu religious texts and culture, Ambedkar is famous for having made good on his 1935 declaration “I was born a Hindu but I will not die a Hindu.” Accordingly, on October 14, 1956, as a mark of resistance and a quest for liberation, Ambedkar, along with 400,000 Dalits, converted from Hinduism to Buddhism in what is one of the largest religious conversions in human history. Given these significant events and developments, it is curious that Gandhi has overshadowed Ambedkar in the US imagination to such an extent that Ambedkar is almost eclipsed. I say “almost” because there is more to the story as readers will see in the section that theorizes caste and race.

The debate between Gandhi and Ambedkar essentially amounted to this: Gandhi argued that political independence from the British should be the primary step for the soon-to-be independent nation. Ambedkar argued that caste-based thinking and acting oppressed India's Dalits long before colonialism and would persist if social independence from caste-based discrimination did not precede—or at least fully accompany—political independence.

I mention this first example in order to make two important observations. If all of them know Gandhi and dropped his name, I expect my interlocutors—from multiple racial/ethnic locations—to have some preliminary knowledge of Gandhi's adversarial conversation partner. A second observation is this: the interlocutors in question are often interested in redressing structural wrongs. In light of this, the eclipsing of Ambedkar, a prominent figure from the margins, is a curious situation indeed. Gandhi—someone from a dominant caste location who had problematic positions on caste and race—seems to occupy all of the ethical attention directed toward the margins. The “if-one-remembers-Gandhi-then-everything-is-all-right” idea represents a dominant kind of thinking that is a by-product of the ways in which persons are socially

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<sup>1</sup>I use “dominant Hindu texts and culture” to refer to Sanskritic interpretations of Hinduism that codify Hinduism's philosophy based on the beliefs and practices of dominant caste Hindus. There are several communities and cultures in India that are labeled “Hindu” but whose beliefs and practices are significantly different from dominant caste Hindus.

conditioned to remember and forget, to keep some things in one's frame of thinking and to keep others out.

All of this often happens without overt ill will or explicitly stated intention. Social conditions put *out of frame* some figures and simultaneously cause to *misremember* those within the frame.

Gandhi's halo, while not completely undeserved, merits critical inspection in light of his problematic and morally ambivalent positions on caste and race.<sup>2</sup> Oliver Cromwell Cox was an early North American critic of Gandhi who recognized Gandhi's problematic entanglements with caste and race.

A second instance comes from another Christian setting. While the first occurred in a seminary, this second happened at a church—an Indian American congregation—when I visited for the first time. I sat at a table with five others during fellowship hour and someone asked me what my research interests were. “The importance of memory of wrongs and how it shapes identity and agency,” I said. A medical doctor interjected and said, “Everyone has a complaint these days. Everyone has a grouse. Everyone is a victim.” This sentiment reminded me of a related dominant political theological thinking today that avers that an active remembrance of wrongs does more bad than good. I clarified that I was talking about structural wrongs, hearing which another person sensibly said, “The USA has not done well with remembering its history of slavery.” One could also say the same thing with remembrance of Native American genocide. Nonetheless, the doctor butted in, “Who is the *voice* of God in America?,” he asked rhetorically a few times. Unsatisfied with my theological response that it could be any of us, he went on to state, “It is a Black guy, Morgan Freeman.” Disallowing dissension in the awkward silence that followed, he continued, “the *voice* of God in Hollywood is a black guy and you *still* want to complain? It's all about one's attitude.”

The medical doctor's mindset represents the “we've got to move on!” point of view in a democratic modern world where persons are perceived to be able to actively participate in every sphere of life. Herein lies a very fundamental problem. The doctor's worldview does not grapple with the persistence of structural wrongs that are enacted everyday against

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<sup>2</sup>For a critical study of Gandhi that makes this point, see Desai and Vahed, *The South African Gandhi*.

persons and communities from historically marginalized communities. Further, the doctor is unable to see how his own presumably innocent statement—from his perspective—can, in fact, be humiliating to and disrespectful of the experiences of a great number of people who continue to suffer wrongs. The doctor's perspective represents a violent mentality and violent identity.

Violent mentalities and identities are formed, passed on, and inherited through such enactments of humiliation. These need to be accounted for in a theorization of wrongs. The reality that this kind of dominant thinking is alive in circles that identify themselves as “Christian” or “religious” impinges on political theological undertakings. This reality merits address and redress.

The goal of this chapter is therefore to show the widespread reality of wrongs, their ritual nature, their subtle yet violent manifestations, and the formation of violent identities in persons co-opted into dominant ways of thinking and acting. In achieving this goal, the chapter will undertake a theorization of caste and race. Such a theorization could facilitate important interdisciplinary conversations between academics and non-academics alike around the subject of wrongs. The coexistence of the rhetoric of freedom and the reality of wrongs in modern democracies makes such a conversation urgent.

This chapter offers accounts of some very gruesome instances of violence that Dalits face in India. I do this in order to give flesh to what I mean by “wrongs.” The chapter focuses much on wrongs that are enacted through caste-based discrimination and humiliation to enable the understanding of wrongs as “rituals of humiliation.” This lens facilitates, as the last section of this chapter shows, a conversation between theorists of caste and race in order to understand what I term “violent identities.”

To enable a better understanding of these complexities, I draw from Bama's novels. Bama holds together an awareness of complex subject formation, on the one hand, and clear ethical critique of wrongs, on the other.<sup>3</sup> Bama is a Dalit woman who is captivated by the liberatory world of the Bible and Christianity. In order to make Christianity's

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<sup>3</sup>I stress this for readers who may worry that a critical interrogation of the self undermines human agency. For an example of such a worry, which I do not dismiss, see Beste, “Limits of Poststructuralism for Feminist Theology,” 5–19.

liberatory potential real, Bama takes up theological education and goes on to become a nun and a teacher. During this process, she unravels a social condition in India that is so deeply pervaded by caste-based discrimination, affecting every religion in India. Bama then decides to disavow her institutional affiliation with Christianity and becomes a writer. Her disavowal of institutional Christianity, however, does not prevent her from positively engaging Christian resources.<sup>4</sup> In this way, Bama's literature helps to garner theological resources from quarters that do not necessarily claim the label "theological" for their work.

In this chapter, my overall task is fourfold: (1) I offer an overview of Dalits in India, outlining the wrongs and prejudices they have suffered and continue to suffer, explaining caste's religious and cultural entanglements, and describing Dalits' ongoing struggles; (2) I present the range of wrongs, theorizing the different levels of their severity and the different modes through which wrongs manifest themselves. These include brutal wrongs inflicted due to structural violence and "ordinary" wrongs, that is, instances of everyday prejudice and discrimination; (3) Employing the category of "rituals of humiliation" to understand contemporary wrongs, I offer four criteria to define such rituals of humiliation and (4) Finally, I apply the insights generated from an understanding of rituals of humiliation to theorize caste and race. I observe how wrongs have a ritualistic character that humiliate persons who move "out of place" and become "visible." Rituals of humiliation, in this sense, seek to keep historically marginalized people "in their place" and render them "invisible" and out of frames of thinking and acting. I will introduce Indian and North American critiques of Gandhi and Ambedkar's interactions with Du Bois to further make these points.

### DALITS IN INDIA: HISTORY AND ONGOING STRUGGLE

"Dalit" is the name given to themselves by communities that were historically discriminated against and cruelly treated as "untouchables." Every sixth human being in the world is an Indian, and every sixth Indian is a Dalit. In terms of numbers, Dalits make up more than 217 million people. This is way over half the population of the USA.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>Christopher also makes this point in "Between Two Worlds," 7–25.

<sup>5</sup>Jadhav, *Untouchables*, 1.

Historically, Dalits were called by derogatory or patronizing names that Dalits have now rejected. These names include “untouchables,” a term sanctioned by Hindu law codes, and Gandhi’s term *Harijan*, a term translated as “children of God.”<sup>6</sup> Gandhi popularized the term in order to give Dalits a face lift. While “untouchable” is derogatory, “Harijan” is patronizing, spiritualizes a social problem, and masks the cruelty of caste. The term “Harijan” thus deflects a critique of oppressive social hierarchy that keeps Dalits at the very bottom through caste-based logic and violent force.

The government of India uses the term “Scheduled Castes” (SCs) for purposes of affirmative action programs, in the sense that Dalits are “scheduled” for certain modes of redress and compensation.

Noting Marathi, Sanskrit, and Hebrew linguistic roots for the term “Dalit,” commentators have delineated how “Dalit” means “oppressed,” “crushed,” “broken.”<sup>7</sup> B.R. Ambedkar—chief architect of the Indian constitution, statesman, and lawyer—was one of the first to employ the term and gave it ideological and political meanings through the concept of “Broken Men,” which also offers a story of origin for Dalits.<sup>8</sup>

“Dalit” is a political and positive identity ascription. It is political because it highlights the survival and continuing resilience of communities that have been wronged for centuries.<sup>9</sup> It is positive because it serves as an umbrella term that seeks to include under one group identity several distinct communities in India that have borne the historical brunt of “untouchability,” thereby making support and mutual affirmation possible.<sup>10</sup> This aspect of mutual support and affirmation that distinct communities—for instance, Mala, Madiga, Paraiyar, Chakkiliyar, Pallar, Chamar, Mang, Holaya, and Pulaya to name just a few—are able to offer to each other makes the term “Dalit” an ecumenical and inclusive one. I lift up this crucial aspect in connection with James Massey’s important qualification that “Dalit is not a caste. Dalit is a symbol of change and revolution.”<sup>11</sup> The term became prominent in Indian national discourse

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<sup>6</sup>Buck and Kannan M., *Tamil Dalit Literature*, ix.

<sup>7</sup>Massey, *Towards Dalit Hermeneutics*, 31.

<sup>8</sup>Peacock, “In the Beginning Is Also an End,” 74–92. Also see Muthukkaruppan, “Dalit,” 34–45; Webster, “Who Is a Dalit,” 11–21.

<sup>9</sup>Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity*, 18.

<sup>10</sup>Clarke, *Dalits and Christianity*, 18. See also Massey, *Roots*.

<sup>11</sup>Cited in Jeremiah, *Community and Worldview among Paraiyars of South India*, 2.

in the 1970s with the emergence of the Dalit Panthers who were inspired by the Black Panthers in the USA.<sup>12</sup>

Noting the anti-caste and ecumenical meanings of the term “Dalit,” the Dalit Panther Party offered a broad definition of the term. The Dalit Panthers Manifesto “included scheduled castes and scheduled tribes,<sup>13</sup> neo-Buddhists (untouchables converted to Buddhism during and after Ambedkar’s historic public act of converting to Buddhism in 1956), the working class, landless poor, peasants and women as part of the collective called dalit.”<sup>14</sup> Such a broad definition of the term facilitates positive political purposes. However, I use the term in its narrower (yet ecumenical) sense to refer to those communities that were historically called and cruelly treated as “untouchables.”

To understand the history of Dalits and the continuing manifestations and practices of caste-based discrimination and cruelty in India (and the diaspora<sup>15</sup>), one needs to sift carefully and critically through history to discern the discriminatory logic of caste. The importance of this sifting is important for a discussion of race as well. Historical entanglements with caste need to be unwound and laid bare because caste does have a certain logic (however malicious) and is embedded within textual and cultural traditions. Cox, early critic of Gandhi and caste, rightly notes that the most important of the early literature to understand the caste system in India are the Vedas (the foundation of revealed Hindu scripture), the Brahmanas (explanations accompanying ritual texts), the Upanishads (philosophical treatises), the dharmashastras (law codes), the epics, and the puranas (myths, legends, and ritual explanations).<sup>16</sup>

One important literary source that sanctions caste-based stratification may be traced back to a 2nd Millennium BCE text called the *Rig Veda*.

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<sup>12</sup>See Limbale, *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature*.

<sup>13</sup>“Tribals” or “Scheduled Tribes,” as the government calls them for purposes of affirmative action, are communities that are increasingly calling themselves “Adivasis” (“first” or “original” inhabitants) and make up a little less than 10% of India’s population.

<sup>14</sup>Muthukkaruppan, “Dalit,” 37.

<sup>15</sup>Swapnil, “Caste and Diaspora,” 80–82.

<sup>16</sup>Cox, *Caste, Class and Race*, xiii. While it is contested whether the Hindu texts I cite on “caste” are representative of the religious traditions they are embedded in, they have provided, in their interpretations and reception, religious and cultural sanction for the hierarchical division of society.

There, in the infamous *Purusasukta* hymn, one finds, as James Massey argues, an etiological account that sanctions the caste system. It reads:

When they divided the Man, into how many parts did they apportion him?  
What do they call his mouth, his two arms and thighs and feet? His mouth  
became the Brahmin; his arms were made into the Warrior (Kshatriya), his  
thighs the People (Vaishya), and from his feet the Servants (Shudra) were  
born.<sup>17</sup>

In this reading, a divine origin is offered for the hierarchical division of Indian society. The four levels correspond to the four major parts of the primordial “Man,” and there are many communities that fall into each of these four levels or classes that are also called *varnas*. In this version, Dalits do not fall into any of these levels and do not have a place in the body politic, not even numbered among the servants (*Shudra*). Consequently, along with Tribals, Dalits are deemed, in this version, “outcastes.” Other terms that are used are *avarnas* (those without *varna*) or *panchamas* (fifth group).<sup>18</sup>

Such etiological accounts have also affected Western social histories. Bruce Lincoln detected a tripartite construction in such socio-genic myths in which social classes were formed from the dismembered body of a primordial man.<sup>19</sup> Such ideas were widely prevalent and disseminated in the heyday of scientific racism. One cannot underestimate their sedimentation in popular imagination today.

Other textual bases for caste-based discrimination include the *Chandogya Upanishad*. There, in the section dealing with paths after death, 10:7 says:

Accordingly, those who are of pleasant conduct here the prospect is, that  
they will enter a pleasant womb, either the womb of a Brahmin, or the  
womb of a Kshatriya or the womb of a Vaishya. But those who are of

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<sup>17</sup>Rig Veda 10.90.10–12. See Massey, *Roots*, 20. As Doniger notes, “In this famous hymn, the gods create the world by dismembering the cosmic giant, Purusa, the primeval male who is the victim in a Vedic sacrifice.” See Doniger’s work, *The Rig Veda*, 20.

<sup>18</sup>Johnson, “Caste.” The top three categories (Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas) are also called *savarnas* (translated “good *varnas*”), with the rest being categorized as *avarnas* (translated “without *varna*”).

<sup>19</sup>Lincoln, *Myth, Cosmos, and Society*, 147–171.



stinking conduct here the prospect is, indeed, that they will enter a stinking womb either the womb of a dog, or the womb of a swine or the womb of an outcast (*Chandala*).<sup>20</sup>

“Chandala” is a derogatory name and is one among other discriminatory and injurious names that are used in ancient Hindu texts for those that are inferiorized as “other” and “outcaste.” Caste-based discrimination is also found in Hindu law codes, also called *dharmashastras*. Their infamous injunctions include the following prescribed punishments for Shudras—the fourth order of castes in the fourfold hierarchy—who dared to move “out of place”:

Now if a Shudra listens intentionally to (a recitation of) the Veda, his ears shall be filled with (molten) tin or lac. If he recites (Vedic texts), his tongue shall be cut out. If he remembers them, his body shall be split in twain. If he assumes a position equal (to that of twice-born men) in sitting, in lying down, in conversation or on the road, he shall undergo (corporal punishment).<sup>21</sup>

The significance of the above-mentioned injunction becomes all the more prominent when we extrapolate the injunction to compare and contrast the situation for Dalits. If Shudras (who have a place in the theologically inflected body politic) themselves were treated thus, how much more extreme would caste-based cruelty be for Dalits who moved “out of place.” I note these religio-cultural textual enmeshments to emphasize the relationship between religion and power.

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<sup>20</sup>Cited in Massey, *Indigenous People*, 28.

<sup>21</sup>*Gautama Dharma Sutra* 12: 4–7. See note 98 in Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*, 270. This legal injunction is often mistakenly attributed to Manu, the author of the *Manusmriti*. *Gautama Dharma Sutra* (600 BCE to 300 BCE) predates the *Manusmriti*. The editor is dependent on Georg Buhler’s 1898 translation. “Twice born” (*dvija*) refers to those in the first three *varnas*—that is, Brahmins, Kshatriyas and Vaishyas—who are “born again,” as Johnson notes, through the ritual of *upanayana* in which a “sacred thread” is endowed on the initiate. Shudras and other communities including Dalits, in this version, are *not* “twice born” and do not get to wear the sacred thread. This ritual is another mode to establishing caste hierarchy. See Johnson, “Caste” and “Sacred Thread.” Important to recognize also is that many of these rituals such as the “sacred thread” are gender-specific and apply only to men of dominant castes. The way in which caste logic discriminates against women is a point made well by Ambedkar. See Ambedkar, *Against the Madness of Manu*.

The caste system is best understood as the *varna-jati* system. The English term “caste system” hides a plethora of concepts that oil the machine of the system. A brief explanation of these concepts is necessary to get a grasp of the logic of caste. *Varna* denotes color or vocation, and *jati* denotes birth. *Varna* is more like a “classificatory unit” that facilitates a sense of “order” and is understood as preventing society’s fall into chaos, and the term *varnashrama dharma* indicates its conceptual framework.<sup>22</sup> Within each *varna* are found the *jatis*—that is, castes into which people are born, marry, and die.<sup>23</sup>

The hereditary element is important to understand in light of the Hindu belief that a person’s caste “is irrevocably dependent upon his past lives.”<sup>24</sup> This is one way to understand the doctrine of *karma*. In this worldview, there are no accidents. One’s current station in life is the result of former works. Karma is a theory of cause and effect and, in essence, a doctrine of “cosmic justice.”<sup>25</sup>

Another important term in this connection is *dharmā*, which refers to caste-based duty or cosmic order. In a *dharmā*-infused worldview, when one’s place in caste-based hierarchy is disturbed, cosmic order is disturbed. In this way, caste hierarchy becomes a sacred order (*dharmā*) that is to be protected against disturbance.<sup>26</sup> This includes keeping Dalits “in their place,” whether or not it is expressed in those words.

In addition to religio-cultural enmeshments that show the malevolence of the caste system, it is helpful to remember that there were and are revered proponents of the caste system who lift up castes as mutually “interdependent social phenomena.”<sup>27</sup> Politically prominent figures (including Gandhi) often argued for the essential goodness of the caste system.<sup>28</sup> Gandhi infamously argued that hierarchy and hereditary

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<sup>22</sup>Jeremiah, *Community and Worldview among Paraiyars of South India*, 1.

<sup>23</sup>Jeremiah, *Community and Worldview among Paraiyars of South India*, 2.

<sup>24</sup>Cox, *Caste, Class and Race*, 5.

<sup>25</sup>Johnson, “Karma.”

<sup>26</sup>Cox, *Caste, Class and Race*, 80.

<sup>27</sup>Cox, *Caste, Class and Race*, 3.

<sup>28</sup>Taking issue with the criticism of the caste system, the current Chairman of the Indian Council for Historical Research (ICHR), in a 2007 blog entry titled “Indian Caste System,” argued for the rejuvenation of the system. Therein, Rao unabashedly notes, “The system was working well in ancient times and we do not find any complaint from any quarters against it. It is often misinterpreted as an exploitative social system for retaining economic and social status of certain vested interests of the ruling class applying the Marxist

occupation could be untied so that each caste can practice its own hereditary occupation without the stigma of inferiority or the pride of superiority:

Caste has nothing to do with religion ... it is harmful to both spiritual and natural growth. Varna and Ashrama are institutions which have nothing to do with castes. The law of Varna teaches us that we have each one of us to earn our bread by following the ancestral calling ... The calling of a Brahman—a spiritual teacher—and of a scavenger are equal and their due performance carries equal merit before God and at one time seems to have carried identical reward before man.<sup>29</sup>

Ambedkar resisted such a spiritualization of caste and dharma because it does not consider their discriminatory social manifestations. Analyzing how many from privileged social locations uncritically accept the discriminatory system of caste, Ambedkar realized that there is a certain “allurement” in Gandhi’s understanding and said the following to make “sense” of it:

Assuming that the Chaturvarnya is practicable, I contend that it is the most vicious system. That the Brahmins should cultivate knowledge, that the Kshatriya should bear arms, that the Vaishya should trade, and that the Shudra should serve, sounds as though it was a system of division of labour. Whether the theory was intended to state that the Shudra need not, or whether it was intended to lay down that he must not, is an interesting question. The defenders of the chaturvarnya give it the first meaning. They say, why need the Shudra trouble to acquire wealth, when the three higher varnas are there to support him? Why need the Shudra bother to take education, when there is a Brahmin to whom he can go when the occasion for reading or writing arises? Why need the Shudra worry to arm himself, when there is the Kshatriya to protect him? The theory

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Footnote 28 (continued)

jargon which has no respect for the ancient systems and philosophy whether Indian or the other.” With Rao’s appointment by the Hindu nationalist party, the BJP, which is the current ruling party in India, his views on the caste system generated debate. See Rao, “Indian Caste System.” For a media report, see Mukul, “Ancient Caste System Worked Well, ICHR Head Says.”

<sup>29</sup>Cited in Omvedt, *Understanding Caste*, 5. Gandhi wrote this in the journal *Harijan* in response to Ambedkar’s *Annihilation of Caste*.

of chaturvarnya, understood in this sense, may be said to look upon the Shudra as the ward and the three higher varnas as his guardians. Thus interpreted, it is a simple, elevating, and alluring theory.<sup>30</sup>

Despite its seemingly “alluring” nature, Ambedkar recognized that the caste system is terribly vicious. Ambedkar rightly employed the phrase “graded inequality”<sup>31</sup> to refer to inequality generated by the system of caste. According to this principle of “graded inequality,” persons are, by default, either “higher” or “lower” in relation to persons from other castes. Equal and mutual reciprocity does not apply to inter-caste interactions. It is no surprise that Ambedkar—unlike Gandhi who idealized the Indian village—rightly argued that Indian villages are sites of oppression when seen through the lens of caste.<sup>32</sup>

A word about the geography of the Indian village would be helpful to understand this. Oor is the Tamil word for village. But this is only the first level of its meaning. The second level of meaning—one that often escapes the uncritical reader—refers to that part of the village where the so-called upper castes live. This second meaning alludes to a dominant understanding in which “the village proper” or the “main” village is that part of the village in which the dominant castes<sup>33</sup> live. Both these meanings are very much present in the word oor. Dalit households are physically separated from the rest of the oor (the second meaning) often by large tracts of land. This Dalit side of every village is called the *cheri*<sup>34</sup>—that is, the part of the village where Dalits live.<sup>35</sup> This reality is not one of a bygone era but one that informs Indian lived reality even today.

The idea of “our side” and “their side,” by virtue of being part of the geography of the village, is also deeply inscribed into patterns of thinking

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<sup>30</sup>Ambedkar, *Annihilation of Caste*, 271–272.

<sup>31</sup>Ambedkar, *Buddha and His Dhamma*, 56.

<sup>32</sup>See Jodhka, “Nation and Village,” 3343–3353 for a good analysis of this debate.

<sup>33</sup>I am dependent on Srinivas’ definition of “dominant caste” here. A caste is “dominant,” says Srinivas, “when it preponderates numerically over the other castes, and when it also wields preponderant economic and political power. A large and powerful caste group can be more easily dominant if its position in the local caste hierarchy is not too low.” See Srinivas, “The Dominant Caste in Rampura,” 1.

<sup>34</sup>The language here is Tamil.

<sup>35</sup>See Shah et al., *Untouchability in Rural India*, 73–75 for more information about village dynamics that are informed by the discriminatory logic of caste.

and acting that differentiate “us” vs. “them,” pushing Dalits and other marginalized groups to the very bottom, in almost every aspect of Indian life. It is for reasons such as these that, contrary to Gandhi who argued for the “self-sufficiency” of the village, Ambedkar opposed it by noting that a village is “a stink of localism, a den of ignorance, narrow-mindedness and communalism.”<sup>36</sup> What Ambedkar rightly says about the caste logic of an Indian village is worth quoting at length for it describes the condition of Dalits:

It is an offence for the Untouchables to break or evade the rule of segregation ... The Untouchables must observe the rule of distance pollution as the case may be. It is an offence to break the rule. It is an offence for a member of the Untouchable community to acquire wealth, such as land or cattle ... It is an offence for a member of the Untouchable community to put on a clean dress, wear shoes, put on a watch or gold ornaments ... It is an offence for a member of the Untouchable community to sit on a chair in the presence of a Hindu. It is an offence for a member of the Untouchable community to ride on a horse or a palanquin through the village. It is an offence for a member of the Untouchable community to take a procession of Untouchables through the village. It is an offence for a member of the Untouchable community not to salute a Hindu ... It is an offence for an Untouchable to wear the outward marks of a Touchable and pass himself as a Touchable.<sup>37</sup>

Most Indians subscribe to the logic and framework of caste. Constant self- and other assessment with respect to “others” is a daily feature of Indian life. I offer two examples from Bama. One occurs in the context of “traditional services” that are expected from Dalits by dominant castes. Individuals from the Dalit community are often ordered around (even today) to perform menial tasks at the behest of dominant caste individuals. This example involves an elder in the Dalit community:

Such an important elder of ours goes off meekly to the shops to fetch snacks and hands them over reverently, bowing and shrinking, to this fellow who just sits there and stuffs them into his mouth. The thought infuriated me.<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>36</sup>Cited in Tummala, “Politics of Decentralization in India,” 50.

<sup>37</sup>I offer here an abridged version of the list. For the full list, see Ambedkar, “Outside the Fold,” 325–326.

<sup>38</sup>Bama, *Karukku*, 13.

As Bama observes, one can be “an elder of our street”<sup>39</sup> and still be treated with utter disrespect and humiliation in the dominant caste street or at the place of work. Another example is relevant here:

What did it mean when they called us ‘Paraya’? Had the name become that obscene? But we too are human beings ... Both my grandmothers worked as servants for Naicker families. In the case of one of them, when she was working in the fields, even tiny children, born the other day, would call her by her name and order her about, just because they belonged to the Naicker caste. And this grandmother, like all the other labourers, would call the little boy Ayya, Master, and run about to do his bidding.<sup>40</sup>

While the logic of caste has its roots in antiquity, one must be careful not to confine the practice of caste to such ancient eras. Further, although the caste system has its roots in dominant Vedic Hinduism, it must be remembered that not all Dalits are Hindus. Dalits are found in all major Indian religious traditions,<sup>41</sup> thus making caste one of the most vicious maladies in India.

Caste is current and is both durable and portable. This includes India’s cosmopolitan cities and towns and the diaspora. This is a helpful reminder to those who, after a lot of argument and persuasion, half-willingly admit that caste (a waning phenomenon, according to them) is perhaps present, but, as they are fond of saying, “only in India’s villages.” In contrast to this misinformed conviction, I note that most spaces in India are entangled with caste. Caste is ingrained into ordinary practices, both private and public.

Sukhadeo Thorat examines contemporary evidence at both macro- and microlevels and outlines various forms of caste-based discrimination in India today and their accompanying prejudices. Untouchability, residential segregation, denial of access to and discriminatory treatment in basic public services, discriminatory restrictions on public behavior, economic discrimination, discrimination in markets like agriculture, consumer platforms, and atrocities (pertaining to civil social, political, and cultural rights) are some of the many cruel manifestations of caste.<sup>42</sup>

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<sup>39</sup>Bama, *Karukku*, 12.

<sup>40</sup>Bama, *Karukku*, 13–14.

<sup>41</sup>Rajkumar, “Dalit Theology,” 134.

<sup>42</sup>Thorat, *Dalits in India*, 129–150.

Caste's hold on contemporary India is still strong, persisting in daily life with both brutal violence and an everyday "slow violence."<sup>43</sup>

The history and ongoing struggle of Dalits in India, no doubt, evidence some of the worst of humanity's proclivity to perpetrating wrongs. At the same time, however, Dalits are not merely victims of wrongs. As Gopal Guru notes, "resistance is internal to humiliation. Since humiliation does not get defined unless it is claimed, it naturally involves the capacity to protest."<sup>44</sup> By giving an account of the wrongs done against them, Dalits subvert the logic of caste, make fun of its cruel presuppositions, and imagine fresh ways of being and doing that envision a just world.

Dalit agency infuses everyday *pathos* with laughter and cheer. In this connection, Bama observes how communities that suffer oppression and suffering have found and find ways of persisting joyfully while simultaneously resisting injustice and exercising agency for freedom. She notes, "Even though they worked hard and suffered bodily pain, our people laughed and were cheerful."<sup>45</sup> In another place, Bama puts it thus: "To bounce like a ball that has been hit became my deepest desire, and not to curl up and collapse because of the blow."<sup>46</sup> The agency is expressed, then, not only in Dalit moves to protest and resistance, but also in Dalits' preservation of a sense of festivity (celebration, laughter, mirth) amid the protest and resistance.

I flag Dalit joy, mirth, and resistance to underscore that this book does not seek to offer a victimology. The oppressed do not allow wrongs to have the last word. Their agency reimagine the world and seeks redress. All of this, however, cannot overlook the cruelty meted out to Dalits. I turn now to describe the breadth and depth of such cruelty.

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<sup>43</sup>Nixon defines "slow violence" as "a violence that occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all." See Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, 2. "Slow violence" helps to make sense of what I name "ordinary" wrongs.

<sup>44</sup>Guru, *Humiliation*, 18.

<sup>45</sup>Bama, *Karukku*, 47.

<sup>46</sup>Bama, *Sangati*, vii.

## RANGE OF WRONGS: BRUTAL WRONGS AND “ORDINARY” WRONGS

Wrongs that cruelly keep people “in their place” may be seen as rituals of humiliation. Rituals of humiliation are conditioned by religious and cultural logics that through ritual means (pure/impure, higher/lower, in/out) prescribe place and status. Often, wrongs against Dalits are perpetrated with greater frequency and force when Dalits move “out of place” and attain status and power that were previously denied to them.<sup>47</sup>

Wrongs against Dalits are not just “history” but a continuation of caste-based cruelties in modern-day India. The accusation of dominant caste members that Dalits are exaggerating or just making things up is a fundamentally mistaken charge. Caste conflict, as Susan Bayly rightly argues, “is no mere orientalist fantasy.”<sup>48</sup> The active remembrance of wrongs is important not only to counter such dominant, false, and cruel claims, but also for engendering responsible habits and rites.

### BRUTAL WRONGS

Since India’s independence from the British in 1947 there have been several (mass) murders of Dalits enacted by Indians from dominant castes. In 1968 in Kilvenmani, Tamil Nadu, 40 Dalits—men, women, and children—were burned by a dominant caste (Naidu) landlord while hiding inside a hut.<sup>49</sup> In 1977 in Belchi, Bihar, 11 Dalits were burned by a dominant caste (Kurmi) caste mob.<sup>50</sup> In 1985 in Karamchedu, Andhra Pradesh, six Dalits were murdered by a dominant caste (Kamma) mob. In 1991 in Chundur, Andhra Pradesh, eight Dalits were murdered by dominant caste Reddys.

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<sup>47</sup>See Christophe Jaffrelot, “Dalits Still Left Out.”

<sup>48</sup>Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics in India from the Eighteenth Century to the Modern Age*, 345. Bayly perhaps has in mind Said’s critique of orientalism; see Said, *Orientalism*.

<sup>49</sup>This atrocity happened in Kilvenmani in the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu. Kannan mentions how the incident is captured in a documentary novel *Cennel* (“Red Paddy”) written by Perumal. Another novel by Parthasarathy, *Kurutippunal* (“Streams of Blood”) also alludes to the Kilvenmani massacre. See Kannan, “Tamil Dalits in Search of a Literature,” 34–35.

<sup>50</sup>Björkert, “Women as Arm-Bearers,” 477. A street theater performance called “Belchi” captures this event for memory; see Anan et al., “Dossier: History, Memory, Event,” 174.



In 2000 in Kambalapalli, Karnataka, seven Dalits were burned to death by a dominant caste mob. I visited this village in 2009 along with some activists and theologians, and we could feel memory heavy with affect, almost as a silence that was closed to inquiries. Dalits there did not want to talk too much about the incident for fear of being harassed by members of dominant castes in the village. At that point, the legal judgment was still pending. In August 2014, 14 years after the brutal killing, the Karnataka High Court acquitted all forty-six of the accused for “lack of evidence.” Interestingly, news reports note that witnesses had turned “hostile.”<sup>51</sup> Although news reports describe the witnesses as having turned “hostile,” such twists and turns in justice are often the result of intimidation or offer of (forced) monetary compensation initiated by dominant caste individuals and lobbies. Dalits sometimes yield to this pressure lest there are further violent repercussions. After all, the local economy, including land, is controlled by dominant castes. Dalits, mostly landless, are dependent on them. Kambalapalli is by no means the last of brutal killings of Dalits in post-independent India.

I could enumerate many other well-documented mass murders of Dalits. The crucial question, however, is why and how these wrongs exist in one of the largest democracies in the world? The clue lies in the continuing power of the past. When persons from historically marginalized backgrounds move “out of place,” members from dominant social locations react negatively. Several of the above-mentioned mass murders occurred in the context of Dalits asking for better wages, demanding dignity, and “speaking back.”

Consider what transpired at Karamchedu. A Kamma (dominant caste) boy washed a buffalo in a water source that Madigas (Dalits) used to drink water from. Understandably, the Madigas protested. The Kammas, however, could not stand the “speaking back.” Hundreds of Kammas fell upon the Dalit quarters of the village and indiscriminately attacked men,

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<sup>51</sup>Mondal, “HC Acquits All 46 Accused of Kambalapalli Massacre.” The news report spells the town’s name as “Kambalpalli” but I use “Kambalapalli,” a spelling that captures the sound that is more natural to the south Indian vernacular.

women (some of whom were pregnant), and children.<sup>52</sup> The Madigas fled to a neighboring village but not without losing six lives in the process. The Kammas, as they physically attacked the fleeing Dalits, also hurled verbal insults such as “Madiga dogs! Have you learnt your lesson well for having opposed the Kammas?”<sup>53</sup>

### ORDINARY WRONGS

Horror stories of crimes against Dalits, unfortunately, are common. Without taking attention away from such horrific violence, I want to turn the reader’s attention to seemingly ordinary ways in which people from privileged social locations contribute to and perpetuate caste-based violence. By “ordinary” I mean the everyday, mundane, taken-for-granted practices that are often portrayed as “neutral.” These “ordinary” wrongs are deeply violent as well and contribute to and often rationalize the more visible and explosive brutal wrongs. Most spaces are caste-ridden, and “ordinary” wrongs pervade the Indian scene on an hourly basis. The logic of caste is ingrained into ordinary practices, both private and public. As Bama puts it, “However much we strain to leap forward, caste holds us down like a tap root. It is at the centre of religion, politics, education, and every other wretched thing.”<sup>54</sup>

One viscerally *feels* caste much before hearing about or understanding it. As Bama notes in *Karukku*, “When I was studying in the third class, I hadn’t yet heard of people speak openly of untouchability. But I had already seen, felt, experienced and been humiliated by what it is.”<sup>55</sup> She goes on to explain:

Until the time that I was in the eighth class, I worked in my village in all these ways. All the time I went to work for the Naickers, I knew I should not touch their goods or chattels; I should never come close to where they were, I should always stand away to one side. These were their rules. I often felt pained and ashamed.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>52</sup>Berg, “Karamchedu and the Dalit Subject in Andhra Pradesh,” 386–387.

<sup>53</sup>Berg, “Karamchedu and the Dalit Subject in Andhra Pradesh,” 388.

<sup>54</sup>Bama, *Sangati*, 102.

<sup>55</sup>Bama, *Karukku*, 11.

<sup>56</sup>Bama, *Karukku*, 46.

Theorists have noted such manifestations that are felt and experienced using Raymond Williams' term, "structure of feeling."<sup>57</sup> Mark Lewis Taylor explains this theoretically difficult-to-understand relational aspect well. "A structure of feeling is always in process, inchoate, infusing, and though difficult for practitioners themselves to name, it is often, nevertheless, determinative of social practice and its intensity."<sup>58</sup> Because of these characteristics, these relations are often not "publicly discernible."<sup>59</sup> However, for those who feel its weight, it is felt with utmost intensity. When we apply this insight to caste, we may say that one of the insidious ways in which caste manifests itself is through seemingly "ordinary" practices of humiliation.

### *Marriage*

Narendra Jadhav puts it well when he notes, "the 3500-year-old caste system in India is still alive and violently kicking. In cities, they will tell you, 'The caste system is a thing of the past, it now exists only in villages.' Go to the villages and they will tell you, 'Oh no. Not here, maybe in some other village.' Yet open the matrimonial section of any newspaper and you will find an unabashed and bewildering display of the persistent belief in caste and subcaste."<sup>60</sup>

In order to further explain what Jadhav calls "an unabashed and bewildering display of the persistent belief in caste," consider a few examples from advertisements for grooms and brides in India's leading national daily, *The Hindu* (the equivalent of *The New York Times*). Compared to religious affiliations that bind<sup>61</sup> people, caste is often stronger glue. Consider this advertisement for a bride that puts caste identity ("Vellalar Pillai"—a dominant caste in Tamil Nadu) before religious (Christian, in this case) identity despite the "Caste No Bar"

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<sup>57</sup>Raymond Williams, cited in Taylor, *Theological and the Political*, 80.

<sup>58</sup>Taylor, *Theological and the Political*, 80.

<sup>59</sup>Taylor, *Theological and the Political*, 80.

<sup>60</sup>Jadhav, *Untouchables*, 3.

<sup>61</sup>Following the definition of religion offered by Durkheim, it is important to note that "religion" comes etymologically from "religio" which means "to bind." See Durkheim, *Elementary Forms of the Religious Life*.

disclaimer. It is helpful to remember that last names are often indicators of caste identity.

Vellalar Pillai, Christian (Caste No Bar), 35/171, Communication VP, International Bank, Singapore. (Native Tanjore), Tamilnadu. Salary above 5 lakhs pm, Clean Habits boy. Seeks Educated girl. (Must Health Conscious) [phone #, e-mail]. (*Published on May 17, 2015*)<sup>62</sup>

As one may notice, sometimes people do say “Caste No Bar.” But that continues to be the exception. Caste identity persists also in the diaspora, demonstrating the durability and portability of caste. Consider this advertisement:

MUDALIAR 23/165 cm B.Tech from Australia seeks boy from UK/USA/Aust. [phone #, e-mail]. (*Published on May 17, 2015*)<sup>63</sup>

“Mudaliar” is a dominant and powerful caste community in the south Indian state of Tamil Nadu. Marriages often occur within the same caste group, and the pursuit of marriage prospects brings out caste prejudices. It is almost as if one has to bare one’s social status in terms of caste before both partners can take the relationship to the “next” level. These are not neutral cultural practices, as some argue. They bring to light the deep rootedness of discriminatory “cultural” notions. Consider this exchange recorded in the novel *Joothan* between Omprakash Valmiki and Savita. Savita, a dominant caste Brahmin woman, mistakes Valmiki for being a dominant caste person.

Valmiki is tired of hiding his Dalit identity from Savita. In the background is his irritation with the fact that Savita’s parents offered tea to a Dalit professor named Kamble in a cup that is exclusively reserved for those deemed impure and inferior by dominant caste logic. To understand this, imagine six people sitting around a table, sipping tea from cups that look exactly the same, except for that one cup in the hands of the only Dalit in the room that looks noticeably different.

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<sup>62</sup>*TheHindu.com*, accessed 5/20/2015, <http://www.thehindu.com/classifieds/matrimonial/>.

<sup>63</sup>*TheHindu.com*, accessed 5/20/2015, <http://www.thehindu.com/classifieds/matrimonial/?list1=bridegrooms&pageNo=4>.

Before Valmiki discloses his own Dalit identity, he brings up the teacup issue for discussion:

My voice hardened, ‘You had given him tea in a different cup?’

‘Yes, the SCs [Dalits] and the Muslims who come to our house, we keep their dishes separate,’ Savita replied evenly.

‘Do you think this discrimination is right?’ I asked. She felt the sharp edge in my voice now.

‘Oh...why, are you mad? How can we feed them in the same dishes?’

‘Why not? In the hotel...in the mess, everyone eats together. Then what is wrong in eating together in your house as well?’ I tried to reason with her.

Savita defended the discrimination as right and justified by tradition. Her arguments were infuriating me. However, I remained calm. According to her, SCs were uncultured. Dirty.

I asked her, ‘How many SCs do you know? What is your personal experience in this regard?’

She fell silent. Her bubbiness subsided. We kept sitting on the ledge for a while.<sup>64</sup>

Neither of the lovers is happy with this turn in the conversation. After an impasse, Valmiki asks Savita what she thinks of him. She conveys that her parents sing his praises and that she is in love with him. Valmiki then goes on to enquire if she would feel the same way about him if he were a Dalit. This hypothetical question upsets Savita, and the conversation continues:

‘You are a Brahmin,’ she said with conviction.

‘Who told you that?’

‘Baba.’ [Father]

‘He is wrong. I am an SC.’ I put all my energy into those words. I felt that a fire had lit inside me.

‘Why do you say such things.’ She said angrily.

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<sup>64</sup>Valmiki, *Joothan*, 97–98.

‘I am telling you the truth. I won’t lie to you. I never claimed that I am a Brahmin.’

She stared at me, totally shocked. She still thought I was joking with her.

I said plainly as I could that I was born in a Chuhra [Dalit] family of U.P. [Uttar Pradesh]

Savita appeared grave. Her eyes were filled with tears and she said tearfully, ‘You are lying, right?’

‘No Savi...it is the truth...you ought to know this.’ I had convinced her.

She started to cry, as though my being an SC was a crime. She sobbed for a long time. Suddenly the distance between us had increased. The hatred of thousands of years had entered our hearts. What a lie culture and civilisation are.<sup>65</sup>

The encounter between Valmiki and Savita reveals several key elements about the logic and practice of caste. They include the pervasive and invasive Indian curiosity about people’s social statuses often gathered through last (caste infused) names; caste-specific hospitality that is really hostility (“How can we feed them in the same dishes?”); prejudices about the “other” and the resulting invocation of stereotypes (according to Savita, Dalits were uncultured and dirty); and the despair that ensues when the veil of innocence is lifted and the reality of cruelty appears (“She started to cry, as though my being SC was a crime”). Caste-based discrimination, unfortunately, is not a thing of the past, and caste is a cruel reality that pervades almost all aspects of collective social life in India. Today, caste often hides under the name of culture. But, ever so often, when people move “out of place,” the hatred of a 1000 years enters human hearts and makes itself visible.

### *Education*

In India, most prominent public amenities, for instance, are located in the “*oor*” of the *oor*, that is, in the “main village” (where dominant castes live) of the village. Bama describes a mundane but striking reality in

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<sup>65</sup>Valmiki, *Joothan*, 97–98.

India. “The post-office, the panchayat<sup>66</sup> board, the milk-depot, the big-shops, the church,<sup>67</sup> the schools—all these stood in their streets.”<sup>68</sup> This often means that Dalit children from the cheris have to walk a distance (or ride a bus) before they reach school. On the way to school and back, Dalit children are often objects for dominant caste gaze, inspection, and judgment.

When Dalit youth leave the village for higher education and return, dominant caste individuals resent the change in the status of Dalits and seek to reassert their place. Ambedkar knew that such caste logic manifests itself in “the inside life in an Indian village.”<sup>69</sup> Ambedkar writes of the dominant caste psyche, “Once a Touchable, always a Touchable. Once an Untouchable, always an Untouchable.”<sup>70</sup> Bama gives flesh to this dominant caste thinking while simultaneously highlighting Dalit resistance:

When I went home for holidays, if there was a Naicker [dominant caste] woman sitting next to me in the bus, she’d immediately ask me which place I was going to, what street. As soon as I said, the Cheri, she’d get up and move off to another seat. Or she’d tell me to move elsewhere. As if I would go! I’d settle into my seat firmly.<sup>71</sup>

On the one hand, Bama’s example could be dismissed by saying, “Maybe the Naicker woman just wanted some space” or “Perhaps she had a cold and did not want a co-passenger to catch it.” On the other hand, this could be argued as a case of modern “untouchability.” This interpretative

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<sup>66</sup>The village council.

<sup>67</sup>It must be mentioned that churches are not always located in that part of the village where the dominant castes live. In many instance, churches and religious places are located in the Dalit colony. These places serve as symbols of assertion, pride, and an alternative reality that is not based on caste logic.

<sup>68</sup>Bama, *Karukku*, 6. An important qualification needs to be added here. Bama is referring to Roman Catholic churches. Depending on particular denominations and locations, churches are often located in Dalit hamlets as well. Churches in Dalit areas symbolize honor, respect, and divine presence and, in this way, are positively subversive spaces in the context of Indian village geography because they do the work of creating new “centers,” rather than accepting assigned marginal locations.

<sup>69</sup>Ambedkar, “Outside the Fold,” 330.

<sup>70</sup>Ambedkar, “Outside the Fold,” 330.

<sup>71</sup>Bama, *Karukku*, 18.

fissure is commonplace in India and is often used in judicial processes by dominant caste lawyers and judges to dismiss legitimate Dalit complaints of caste-based discrimination. Although “untouchability” is legally abolished in India and is a punishable offense under the Indian Penal Code, caste-based practices continue to be enacted by dominant castes. No doubt, there is Dalit resistance and subversion of these dominant discriminatory codes. As a matter of fact, caste-based wrongs perpetrated today may be understood as a result of Dalit resistance and subversion of these discriminatory codes—a result of moving “out of place.” This aspect cannot be stressed enough.

Constitutional safeguards, largely due to the efforts of Ambedkar, have ensured affirmative action policies that involve reservations for Dalits in educational institutions and also in government employment.<sup>72</sup> While many Dalits use these provisions to attain greater social mobility and move “out of place,” these very measures are also used by dominant castes to humiliate and degrade Dalits. Whether in the pretext of singling out Dalit students for special tutoring programs or just dominant caste members’ curiosity, asking Dalit children to stand up “at assembly, or during lessons”<sup>73</sup> is a method of inscribing and reinforcing identity through public humiliation. Teachers ask Dalit students to stand in the classroom as other students (from dominant castes) are seated. No doubt, free or subsidized books and other resources are available and distributed to Dalit students. These resources, however, could be made available by asking Dalit students to come to the administration building to collect them instead of asking the Dalit students to self-identify in front of everyone. During this ritualized process—that involves watching Dalit students stand, inspecting their clothing to inferiorize them, or labeling them as poor and needy—children from dominant castes will often snicker, laugh, or poke fun at their Dalit classmates. Allow me to elaborate on these important observations of school life (kindergarten to high school) that continues into higher education (undergraduate and further).

When students enter undergraduate and graduate schools through affirmative action policies, dominant caste professors often ask Dalit

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<sup>72</sup>In civil services, 17% of seats are reserved for Dalits. For more context, see Jaffrelot, “The Impact of Affirmative Action in India,” 173–189 and Jaffrelot, “The Politics of Caste Identities,” 80–98.

<sup>73</sup>Bama, *Karukku*, 18.



students to identify themselves and take the liberty to admonish and advise them to work hard. They condescendingly state that grades are given for “merit” and not through “reservations” (affirmative action). This public mockery of Dalit students does not care to recall the historical oppression and the consequent historical disadvantage that Dalits have faced (and continue to face) due to caste-based discrimination. There is no remembering of wrongs. No grief. No corresponding responsible agency that offers support. Only humiliation.

Dalit students have noted how dominant caste professors make a little mark next to their names in attendance registers on the first day of class after asking them to identify themselves. This is the lens through which Dalit students are perceived throughout their college education. Furthermore, because of the unstated resentment that other dominant caste students harbor against Dalits for “taking up seats that are rightfully theirs,”<sup>74</sup> the professors’ practice of asking Dalit students to self-identify also becomes a way of announcing to the class the identities of those they already despise. This perpetuates not only, as we have seen, public humiliation but a simultaneous cruel suspicion of the merit and academic character of Dalit students.<sup>75</sup> Bama captures the humiliating nature of such rituals:

All the same, every now and then, our class teacher, or the PT<sup>76</sup> teacher would ask all the Harijan [Dalit] children to stand up, either at assembly, or during lessons. We’d stand. They’d write down our names, and then ask us to sit down again. We felt really bad then. We’d stand in front of nearly two thousand children, hanging our heads in shame, as if we had done something wrong. Yes, it was humiliating.<sup>77</sup>

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<sup>74</sup>For understanding how prejudice works in response to “the question of merit,” see Thaali, “Academic Untouchability.” Thaali’s perspectives are also informed by her reading of Patricia Hill Collins and Toni Morrison.

<sup>75</sup>For an in-depth explanation and analysis of this situation in Indian campuses of higher learning, see the four-part video presentation by Dalit activist and educator Kumar, “Caste in Indian Campuses: Experiences and Activism 1” <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lcmJWC2rU5Y&feature=share>. Parts 2, 3 and 4 are found as further links. Also see Gaikwad, “How Casteist is Our Varsity?” <http://www.thehindu.com/features/education/college-and-university/how-casteist-is-our-varsity/article3958114.ece>.

<sup>76</sup>Abbreviation for “*physical training*,” a common part of the school curriculum in India.

<sup>77</sup>Bama, *Karukku*, 18.

One of the purposes of this chapter, as already stated, is to give not only an account of the heinous nature and function of caste and caste-based cruelty, but also to demonstrate the “ordinary” manifestations of caste in everyday life, which underlie the cruelty. These “ordinary” spheres of speech, behavior, and politics are often those that make possible the enactment of brutal wrongs by contributing to the formation of violent identities. Human identities—including everyday dispositions and reactions to wrongs—are socially conditioned through seemingly ordinary social, political, and psychological processes that are uncritically repeated.

As Bayly notes, “despite the great diversity of India’s social and political experience since Independence, awareness of both ‘substantialised’ and ‘traditional’ *jati* and *varna* norms continues to be transmitted from one generation to another, subtly changing to accommodate new circumstances, and yet persistently recapitulating messages about the importance of preserving and perpetuating one’s ‘community.’”<sup>78</sup>

Examining “ordinary” ways in which caste manifests itself becomes significant also in light of uncritical remarks like “I thought that was a thing of the past” or “Does that really happen?” Each of these questions in different ways testifies to a claimed general ignorance, a structure of unknowing, or an unwillingness to know, if you will, when it comes to the historical formation of this violence suffered by Dalits. In fact, I argue that the very identity of non-Dalits is formed and arises out of such conditioned reflexes of willed ignorance that is shaped by centuries of caste logic and practice. Let me elaborate.

### *The Home*

Indian households, in general, practice the leaving of footwear at the door before entering the house. Homes in India, at least those that can afford maids, often have gates that lead to a portico before one arrives at the door. Maids, mostly Dalits, are often called “servants.” It is an unsaid rule that “servants” are to leave their footwear outside the gate, far away from the door. This othering establishes difference, enacts inferiorization, and seeks to keep them “in their place.” Such a practice, established over centuries of caste-based order and discrimination, reflects the deeply ingrained patterns of oppressive social practice—a ritual of humiliation.

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<sup>78</sup>Bayly, *Caste, Society and Politics in India*, 335.

Upon entering the house, “servants” are generally not allowed to sit on the couch in the living room, so much so that it is often neither attempted nor prevented. They stand while talking. If offered a beverage, snack, or meal, they either stand in the kitchen and eat and drink in haste, or, if invited to other spaces in the house, sit on the floor while the owners sit on the couch and literally look down on them. Even in our family home with my parents, this used to be the case until we sat down, critiqued our practices, and changed our patterns. Many of these practices, to varying degrees of intensity, are done without conscious reflection and are taken for granted as the way things are generally. In other words, these are conditioned reflexes. I theorize such conditioned reflexes—what I term “socially conditioned corporeal habits”—in the next chapter.

Indians, unable to escape their “hospitable” selves, often *feed* the “servants.” Designated plates and glasses are used for this purpose. These designated “servant” plates are either of lesser quality than the ones used by the inhabitants of the house or are cracked worn-down ones. These plates are often kept in a separate place, away from the rest of the culinary and cutlery items—much like the *cheri* in the *oor*. I know of many homes in which the “servant” plates and glasses are kept under the kitchen sink along with detergent and other half-used cleaning items—where they “belong.” If confronted, such privileged persons are content to note how they *feed* their servants. In so doing, they ascribe hospitality to themselves, but never malevolence. Malevolence, however, hides under such outward acts. An ancient Hindu law code (from the *Manusmriti*) helps to make sense of how such discriminatory beliefs shape practices even if they are not explicitly invoked:

But the dwellings of ‘Fierce’ Untouchables and ‘Dog-Cookers’ should be *outside the village, they must use discarded bowls*, and dogs should be their wealth. Their clothing should be the clothes of the dead, and *their food should be in broken dishes*; their ornaments should be made of black iron, and they should wander constantly. A man who carries out his duties *should not seek contact with them*; they should do business with one another and marry with those who are like them. *Their food, dependent upon others, should be given to them in a broken dish*, and they should not walk about in villages and cities at night.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> *Manusmriti* 10: 51–54. See Manu, *Laws of Manu*, 242. Emphasis mine.

Such is the power of social conditions that inform subject formation. Much of caste-based discrimination, as explained above, goes on in the name of preserving “culture” and “community.” We have considered how caste works in marriage unions, educational institutions, and family households.

### *Food*

Food habits, too, are often markers of caste hierarchy. As a general rule, the greater one’s distance from meat, the “higher” up one probably is in the caste hierarchy. I remember my own childhood days during which my paternal Dalit grandmother, Devasitham, who is no more, would hang pieces of salted and marinated cow meat to dry and then distribute them to her children who would then fry them up. This used to be a delicacy among the grandchildren. At the same time, beef eating was also a source of embarrassment when talking about food in public. When my grandmother had become bed-ridden, our uncles used to ask us whether we wanted “peresu” (“big”), a Tamil euphemism for “beef,” alluding to the fact that cows are “big” compared to, say chicken or goat. They would never say “maadu” (Tamil for “cow”) or “maatu kari” (“cow meat” or “beef”). My deceased maternal grandmother, Basavamma, although not Dalit, had a certain fondness for beef, but every time she would say “beef”—or, to be true to her intonation, “beepu”—she would lower her voice lest the neighbors hear her. If a neighbor remarked that they can smell some good meat cooking, my grandmother would immediately say, “Well, yes, we are cooking some mutton today,” trying to pass off beef for goat. It worked.

Dominant caste Christians often flaunt their dominant caste identities by announcing their last names. As is often the case, last names<sup>80</sup> indicate caste identity. I remember a “Mr. Tiwari”—a high-ranking administrator in a theological school—who would tell his hosts that he would need special all-vegetarian dietary options. Of course, he would not say, “I am Brahmin, my last name is Tiwari, and therefore I need vegetarian food,” but all that is already implied. Food habits thus become, however else

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<sup>80</sup>Last names are often indicators of caste. “Patel,” “Reddy,” “Naidu,” “Tiwari,” “Deshpande,” “Grewal,” “Chivukula,” and “Arora” are only a few examples.

one seeks to rationalize them, markers of social hierarchy. But there is more to food habits than this.

### *Nation, Place, and Politics*

India is often presented by its Hindutva proponents as having had a glorious, harmonious, and unified identity, which was destroyed by Muslims and other invading alien forces. “Hindutva” is a strand of dominant religious thinking that is tied to extreme nationalist and xenophobic interpretations of Hinduism.<sup>81</sup> While linguists, archeologists, and historians of culture have pointed out fundamental flaws with this line of thinking, Hindutva ideologues (including the national political party, the Bharatiya Janata Party or BJP) continue to dismiss them and choose to propagate a sanitized version. Martha Nussbaum, noting these things, points out that “telling this story involves greatly playing down other sources of difficulty in ancient and medieval India, such as tensions deriving from class, caste, and the oppression of women.”<sup>82</sup> Such “playing down” involves the vilification of not only religious minorities but also other minorities like Dalits and Tribals. Children, for instance, are falsely taught in dominant caste homes that ancient Indians did not eat beef,<sup>83</sup> thus seeking to discredit or erase the Indian identity of those who do.

We see thus that a seemingly simple and “ordinary” habit of eating has concrete political implications because of its association with hierarchized caste identity. It is a common experience for Dalit families to be told by dominant caste landlords, “We rent our flat only to vegetarians.”

One’s ability to move into certain neighborhoods and gated communities or buy real estate in certain locations often depends on one’s caste/cultural weight that could either work in one’s favor or prevent one from attaining social mobility.<sup>84</sup> The land where our parents constructed their home is located in a neighborhood that is populated by dominant castes. Even in a cosmopolitan city like Bengaluru, we knew

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<sup>81</sup>Here, it is important to note that “Hindutva” is not to be equated with “Hindu” or “Hinduism.” “Hinduism” represents a wide-ranging set of beliefs and practices.

<sup>82</sup>Nussbaum, *Clash Within*, 213–214.

<sup>83</sup>Nussbaum, *Clash Within*, 213, 224–227. Also see Jha, *Myth of the Holy Cow*.

<sup>84</sup>Singh and Vithayathil, “Spaces of Discrimination,” 60–66; Gayer and Jaffrelot, *Muslims in Indian Cities*; Judge, *Mapping Social Exclusion in India*; Nightingale, *Segregation*.

what our neighbors' caste identities were: Reddy, Komti, Nair, Gowda, Syrian Christian, and others—all indicators of dominant caste status.

There is a connection between ordinary practices and more brutal wrongs. "Ordinary" violence of everyday caste-signifying moves from identity formation to spectacles of brutal violence. Five Dalit men in the north Indian state of Haryana were killed during October 2002.<sup>85</sup> That this was an atrocity against Dalits by 'upper' caste Hindus is horrific enough—a crime committed by Hindus against their "own." That is, aggressors and victims were both Hindu. On closer inspection, however, the incident brings to light many inherent tensions that are embedded in Indian society that are caste-based *and* religious. The "official version" captured in union minister I.D. Swamy's response to a question raised in the parliament summarizes the case thus: the killing of the five Dalits was "because of the mistaken impression that a cow slaughter<sup>86</sup> was being committed openly."<sup>87</sup> The incident reveals deeply disturbing details. The VHP, a Hindutva organization, defended the killings through a public statement; representatives from local *gaushallas*<sup>88</sup> and *gurukuls*<sup>89</sup> also issued "statements that amounted to saying that the life of a cow was more valuable than that of humans."<sup>90</sup>

What is further disturbing in the "official version" is that the killing was explained as a consequence of a "mistaken motive" and "mistaken identity"—"mistaken motive" because they *thought* that the Dalit men were *slaughtering* a cow (versus skinning a dead cow for hide and meat); "mistaken identity" because they "also had no clue to the fact that those who were being lynched were [Hindu] Dalits and not 'kasais' (Muslim slaughterers)."<sup>91</sup> Note the caste and religious logic that is functioning

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<sup>85</sup>Jodhka and Dhar, "Cow, Caste and Communal Politics," 174–176.

<sup>86</sup>For a discussion of the politics involved around "cow slaughter" and how meat becomes a site for construction of identity, see Ahmad, "Delhi's Meatscapes," 21–31.

<sup>87</sup>Cited in Jodhka and Dhar, "Cow, Caste and Communal Politics," 174.

<sup>88</sup>Shelters for aging cattle.

<sup>89</sup>Educational centers often run by Hindu organizations.

<sup>90</sup>Jodhka and Dhar, "Cow, Caste and Communal Politics," 175.

<sup>91</sup>Jodhka and Dhar, "Cow, Caste and Communal Politics," 175.

here: if you are a “cow killer,” you deserve to be killed, but with some regret; if you are a “cow killer” who is Muslim, you deserve to be killed, but without much regret, if any.

In an interview with R. Azhagarasan, Bama makes reference to the above-mentioned event. What she has to say is instructive:

I must say something about the ‘Writers Meet’ that I attended in Paris. We were twenty writers there. I felt so out of place because their values were totally different from mine. I was totally disheartened by one particular incident. I was talking about the five Dalits in Haryana who had been brutally killed for processing beef. I commented on the violent mentality of the caste Hindus that had led to this massacre. An Indian writer who was there argued that the cow was a holy and sacred animal for Hindus, and so the killing of the Dalits was justified. That incident is like a lifelong wound to me.<sup>92</sup>

Indeed, when wrongs are not redressed and when wrongs are dismissed, they create lifelong wounds and debilitate the agency of those suffering the wrongs. They also reveal that particular socio-cultural imaginations inform and form human values. As Bama notes in the quote above, “their values were totally different from mine.”

Socio-cultural and theological imaginations have concrete political implications that affect day-to-day interactions. Such imaginations enthrall and mesmerize human thinking to such an extent that they hide other pressing realities and wrongs, thereby forming violent identities; so much so that wrongs (the killing of the five Dalit men in Bama’s example) are not only dismissed or forgotten, but also justified. Connections between imagination, identity, and action are subtle yet determinative. Theorizing wrongs merits fleshing out some of these connections, which I will take up in the section “Formation of Violent Identities: Theorizing Caste and Race.” Before that, however, I turn to theorize the many instances of brutal and “ordinary” wrongs by using the category “rituals of humiliation.”

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<sup>92</sup>Bama, *Vanmam*, 156.

## WRONGS: RITUALS OF HUMILIATION

Wrongs today are better understood as rituals of humiliation. While wrongs merit address and redress, a theorization of wrongs as “rituals of humiliation” will enable a focused attention and helpful analysis of the problem. Taking into account the several examples mentioned in the previous section, “rituals of humiliation” may be described as contemporary social practices of inferiorization that are historically conditioned and continue to humiliate individuals and communities who were historically marginalized. I use four criteria to define “rituals of humiliation”: (1) the subject feels humiliated by the act; (2) the action must have a repetitive identifiable pattern; (3) the act may have inherited its discriminatory logic from culturally, religiously, or legally sanctioned codes from the past; and because of the above and (4) the humiliation does not depend on the so-called “intention” of the actor or aggressor.

For a theorization of rituals of humiliation, I take a cue from Dalit theorist Gopal Guru who argues that in India sociologists offer accounts of discriminatory practices but rarely provide any explanation of the psychological and social conditioning that leads to such discriminatory practices.<sup>93</sup> In this light, Guru avers that theorists need to analyze “the repository of humiliation.”<sup>94</sup> Humiliation’s logic and repository needs to be examined.<sup>95</sup> When one applies the concept of rituals of humiliation to the wrongs described in this chapter, one can discern several predictable patterns.

One significant pattern is that rituals of humiliation are enacted against persons and communities when they move “out of place.” This observation, interspersed in above sections, is especially important to note. Rituals of humiliation are reactions. They may be conscious and/or subconscious, which is to say that they are socially conditioned to such an extent that they characterize dominant modes of societal interactions between in-groups and out-groups.

Dalits today assert their dignity in many spheres. In others words, they move “out of place.” One judicial protection that Dalits invoke is the Prevention of Atrocities Act (1989) that is designed to convict

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<sup>93</sup>Guru, *Humiliation*, xi.

<sup>94</sup>Guru, *Humiliation*, xi.

<sup>95</sup>This is one of the reasons for using Bama’s novels in this chapter. Dalit literature has examined and inspected the concept of humiliation. See Guru, *Humiliation*, x.



perpetrators of caste-based violence. When she believes that she has been discriminated and humiliated on the basis of caste, the complainant is to register a complaint at the local police station under this particular act. Often, however, local police refuse to register the complaint under this act even when caste is involved. Furthermore, even in cases in which a complaint is registered under the act, there are further challenges. US readers may call to mind the many rulings of “no indictment” in cases in which police officers fatally shoot racialized unarmed people.

Members of the judiciary—whom one would expect to deliver impartial legal justice—unfortunately, remain closer to “their caste than to secular laws.”<sup>96</sup> Guru refers to the case of a lower court judge from the state of Rajasthan who, while considering the complaint of rape lodged by Bhanwari Devi, declared, “touching a lower caste is not in the culture of Indian society.”<sup>97</sup> A judge of the state dismisses the complaint by invoking caste logic. Caste logic is used in the service of humiliation by a person who symbolizes justice. One sees a double humiliation here. Rape is the first humiliation. The caste-based dismissal of the complaint is a second act of humiliation. These practices have a predictable ritualistic character. It is important to note that, often, such double humiliation occurs in the context of wronged people seeking redress—almost as if intended to put people back in their marginalized place.

Bama’s commentary on similar matters through the character of Mariamma, a Dalit girl in one of her novels, is instructive here. Mariamma goes out to the fields to gather firewood. The dominant caste landlord tries to sexually molest her and she escapes. She comes home and tells her family and friends. This is what she is told:

‘Mariamma,’ they said, ‘it is best if you shut up about this. If you even try to tell people what actually happened, you’ll find that it is you who will get the blame; it’s you who will be called a whore. Just come with us quietly, and we’ll bring away the firewood that you left there. Hereafter, never come back on your own when you have been collecting firewood. That landowner is an evil man, fat with money. He’s upper caste as well. How can we even try to stand up to such people? Are people going to believe

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<sup>96</sup>Guru, “Liberal Democracy in India and the Dalit Critique,” 112.

<sup>97</sup>Guru, “Liberal Democracy in India and the Dalit Critique,” 112–113.

their words or ours? And so they went together, picked up the bundle of firewood, sold it, and then went home.<sup>98</sup>

Note in the above quote how Dalits recognize the everyday ritualistic character of humiliation: the victim gets blamed and the “honor” of the dominant caste person is protected by the state. Seeking to avoid such humiliation, Mariamma’s companions tell her, “It is best if you shut up about this.” When Dalit women who are sexually harassed by dominant caste persons lodge a formal complaint, it is often Dalit women who get humiliated.

When we look at the two examples above, what Guru calls Ambedkar’s “radical critique”<sup>99</sup> holds true. Modern liberal institutions are not able to exorcise what Guru perceptively names as “the ghost of caste.”<sup>100</sup> Because this “ghost of caste” continues to haunt modern India, “[Dalit] claims for dignity,” as Guru helps us to understand, often involves “a heavy price.”<sup>101</sup> Chundur, Karamchedu, Kambalapalli—mentioned under brutal wrongs—and other instances are examples of rituals of humiliation that Dalits are subjected to when they assert claims to dignity and move “out of place.”

Recall that in the Karamchedu mass murders, Dalits were called “Madiga dogs!”<sup>102</sup> by the mob and asked “Have you learnt your lesson well for having opposed the Kammas?” Speaking about “wrongs” is risky business. Speaking back, looking in the eye, moving out of place: all of these movements evoke resentment in persons from dominant social locations who then enact rituals of humiliation.

Images and symbols, for instance, that celebrate Dalit identity by invoking Ambedkar—statesman and advocate of Dalit rights—are perceived as “threats.” Statues of Ambedkar are often vandalized. In May 2015, Sagar Shejwal, a Dalit youth, was beaten to death by a mob of “upper-caste” men<sup>103</sup> for having a ringtone on his cell phone that praised Ambedkar. Shejwal moved “out of place.” Shejwal was getting a hair-cut in a salon. In itself, this act broke caste boundaries, which historically

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<sup>98</sup>Bama, *Sangati*, 19–20.

<sup>99</sup>Guru, “Liberal Democracy in India and the Dalit Critique,” 117.

<sup>100</sup>Guru, “Liberal Democracy in India and the Dalit Critique,” 117.

<sup>101</sup>Gopal Guru, “Democracy in Search of Dignity,” 75.

<sup>102</sup>“Madiga” is the name of a Dalit community.

<sup>103</sup>Gaikwad, “Dalit Youth Killed for Keeping Ambedkar Song as Ringtone.”

prohibited the reception of such services by Dalits. Dalits were often the ones who historically offered such services. Shejwal's presence, combined with the possession of a gadget that sang the praises of Ambedkar, elicited a ritual of humiliation. Dominant caste persons perceived Seghwal as moving "out of place."

In May 2015, a Dalit bridegroom was told by dominant caste villagers that, according to the village's caste codes of conduct, Dalits were not allowed to ride a horse through the village. Defying the village code, the Dalit family rode through only to be pelted with stones by a dominant caste mob. Expecting this, a helmet was placed on the groom's head.<sup>104</sup> Moving "out of place" by members from historically discriminated communities evokes resentment and elicits rituals of humiliation enacted by historically privileged persons.

Contemporary forms of humiliation and repulsion are thus the manifestations of dominant resentment over the defiance of caste-based codes by historically disadvantaged communities like Dalits. Indians, irrespective of their religious affiliations, often fall prey to such caste-based logic and practice. The only difference among people of different faiths is that some have religious sanction for caste-based discrimination while others do not. I recall a dominant caste (Syrian Christian<sup>105</sup>) acquaintance who told me the story of his family's driver (presumably of "lower" caste ranking) who refused to give up his seat on the couch in their living room to a dominant caste guest. My acquaintance verbalized his resentment to me in the following way: "We treated him as one of us but then he 'sat on our head'," alluding to a common dominant caste fear and complaint that members of marginalized groups no longer stay "in their place." On the one hand, my acquaintance seeks to portray himself as the protagonist of the story for having allowed their "driver" (a subordinate) to occupy a seat in the living room couch. Given Indian families' maltreatment of their domestic help (including drivers), this Christian family seems, on first sight, to be progressive and free from the logic of caste.

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<sup>104</sup>Ghatwai, "Dalit Groom Forced to Wear Helmet as Upper Caste Villagers Stone Baraat."

<sup>105</sup>"Syrian Christians," also called St. Thomas Christians, are Christian communities in India that trace their origins to Thomas the Apostle who they believe came to India. Their liturgy has traditionally been in Syriac and hence the name. Syrian Christians have established themselves as dominant castes and enjoy being recognized as such.

A second reading, however, reveals that a caste code—recall Ambedkar’s list of Hindu codes—seems to play out its logic.

The stoning of the Dalit bridegroom and my friend’s resentment—conditioned reflexes—are both manifestations of “violent identities”: that is, those identities, formed by historical privilege, which are complicit in enacting rituals of humiliation. To this list, we could add so many other examples.

Today, persons from historically marginalized communities continue to move *out* of historically assigned places and positions of servitude and oppression. This moving “out of place,” however, evokes reactions that are commonplace among persons from privileged social locations.<sup>106</sup> Although the following quote is not from the present, it helps to see the present in light of the past by using the lens of race:

Periodically there seems to develop a situation in which a number of Negroes begin to rebel against caste restrictions. This is not an open revolt but gradual, probably more or less unconscious, in which little by little, they move out of the strict pattern of approved behavior. The whites feel this pressure and begin to express resentment. They say the Negroes are getting ‘uppity’ and they are getting out of place, and that something should be done about it.<sup>107</sup>

The next chapter facilitates a deeper conversation between caste and race by considering “out of place” movements. Such moving out of place, real and perceived, causes strong and often violent reactions in members from privileged social locations. It is helpful to remember that it was *after* the passing of the Fourteenth Amendment that whites recoiled and instituted policies and practices that kept people “separate but equal.” Jim Crow laws, in this light, were a reaction to people moving “out of place.” Recent commentators have noted that even in states that did not institute Jim Crow laws, “informal codes and practices of exclusion”<sup>108</sup> were common.

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<sup>106</sup>For a recent work on violent reactions to people moving “out of place,” see Anderson, *White Rage*.

<sup>107</sup>Cited in Visweswaran, *Un/common Cultures*, 120. For a fuller description and elaboration of the problem, see Davis, Gardner, and Gardner, *Deep South*.

<sup>108</sup>Markus and Moya, *Doing Race*, 55.

In the US context, readers would do well to remember that the history of police started not in legal history but rather in social history.<sup>109</sup> Modern police forces originate in large part from a social history that enacted slave patrols and town watches<sup>110</sup> meant to keep certain people “in their place.” Judith Butler, on whom I depend for a theoretical framing of key issues in this chapter, notes how “to be put in one’s place,” as some of these injunctions are designed to do, means that “such a place may be no place,”<sup>111</sup> thus undermining a sense of belonging so vital to nurturing bonds in society. There is another way to look at this problematic. When members of historically discriminated communities move “out of place,” rituals of humiliation are enacted against them in order to put them “in their place”—a “no place.”

Political objectives have historically conditioned “many law enforcement priorities.”<sup>112</sup> More than three million Blacks left Cotton Belts in the twentieth century.<sup>113</sup> Whether Blacks or others, the “persistent conviction of white male elites that the nation faces an existential threat from hostile races and foreign ideas” led to a situation in which perceived “opponents, whether Indian, Communist, Filipinos, immigrant workers, or African Americans [and one could certainly add more ethnic groups here], are portrayed in political language and popular culture as threats to US core values.”<sup>114</sup> In other words, when persons from historically marginalized groups moved “out of place,” patrolling of spaces and bodies mushroomed along with the perpetuation of negative stereotypes.

Such patrolling of spaces is a development that preceded the twentieth century and goes back to the time of the New England Puritans. Interestingly, patrolling of spaces has a religious history. Unlike in England where various denominations debated fiercely with each other about religious matters, New England Puritans tended to sequester themselves physically. They marked boundaries and removed themselves to create new geographical settlements. This simultaneously meant policing space against others deemed as problematic outsiders. As Daniel

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<sup>109</sup>Barrie and Broomhall, *History of Police and Masculinities*, 231, no. 8.

<sup>110</sup>Barrie and Broomhall, *History of Police and Masculinities*, 218.

<sup>111</sup>Butler, *Excitable Speech*, 4.

<sup>112</sup>Barrie and Broomhall, *History of Police and Masculinities*, 219.

<sup>113</sup>Klein, *Empire State: A History of New York*, 629.

<sup>114</sup>Barrie and Broomhall, *History of Police and Masculinities*, 219.

Boorstin notes, “the American Puritans were given to marking off the boundaries of their new towns, to enforcing their criminal laws, and to fighting the Indian menace.”<sup>115</sup> Keeping people “in their place” is internal to discriminatory logic that undergirds rituals of humiliation today.

In his 2004 book, *Who We Are: The Challenges to America's National Identity*, Samuel Huntington, who taught across the street from where I currently write this book, problematically averred, “There is no *Americano* dream. There is only the American dream created by an Anglo-Protestant society. Mexican Americans will share in that dream and in that society only if they dream in English.”<sup>116</sup> Although not Mexican, Luis Gutiérrez, a Puerto Rican congressman from Chicago, while inside the Capitol and on his way to the office in the building, was yelled at by a security aide<sup>117</sup> who did not believe him when he identified himself and presented his ID card. “It must be fake,” the aide remarked, going on to add, “Why don’t you and your people just go back to the country you came from?” Gutierrez, who was with his 16-year-old daughter and his niece on that day, asks, “Can you imagine how humiliating this was?”<sup>118</sup> Clearly, despite speaking in English, dominant social conventions enact such rituals of humiliation even on those who govern the so-called American dream.

To briefly go back to my point that it is when persons from historically marginalized people groups move “out of place” that patrolling of spaces and bodies is deemed necessary, it is important to remember that the second Ku Klux Klan was founded in 1915 in Georgia. The timing of this formation almost went hand in hand with the Great Migration.<sup>119</sup> When persons from historically marginalized backgrounds move “out of place” and begin to become visible in unprecedented ways, rituals

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<sup>115</sup>Boorstin, *Americans*, 9. Emphasis mine.

<sup>116</sup>Gutierrez and Almaguer, *New Latino Studies Reader*, 316.

<sup>117</sup>This example is interesting because, here, the ritual of humiliation is enacted by a security aide, a “lower” ranking person in the Capitol. It needs to be stressed, in this connection, that discriminatory logics are so enmeshed in the way humans think and act, so much so that it affects both dominant and dominated members.

<sup>118</sup>Oboler, “It Must Be a Fake!” 125–126.

<sup>119</sup>Boorstin calls this period “the new segregation.” See Boorstin, *Americans*, 414–415, 470.

of humiliation are enacted. African-American civil-rights lawyer Bryan Stevenson, referring to the Rosa Parks incident in Montgomery, says:

Here's what most people don't know. After the boycott was declared officially over, and black people were sitting on the buses, there was unbelievable violence. There were a dozen people who were shot standing waiting on buses. We had white people going around Montgomery shooting black people who dared to get on the buses... Where did all of those people go? They had power in 1965. They voted against the Voting Rights Act, they voted against the Civil Rights Act, they were still here in 1970 and 1975 and 1980. And there was never a time when people said, 'Oh, you know that thing about segregation forever? Oh, we were wrong. We made a mistake. That was not good.' They never said that. And it just shifted. So they stopped saying 'Segregation forever,' and they said, 'Lock them up and throw away the key.'<sup>120</sup>

Stevenson's observation helps to understand some of the social history that is in the background as one seeks to understand the discriminatory logics that characterize rituals of humiliation. The "lock-them-up-and-throw-away-the-key" idea is certainly one that helps to understand practices of mass incarceration today. Practices of mass incarceration are often rituals of humiliation that create a pipeline between schools and prisons in the USA.<sup>121</sup>

The role of religion in perpetuating and informing rituals of humiliation is also one that needs to be kept in mind. Racialized thinking today, for instance, is often determined by religion. The covert role of religion in racialized thinking needs to be kept in mind as we further examine the relationship between religion and power in subsequent chapters.

Human societies inherit discriminatory logics from the past that continue to mutate and permutate in ways that are not always readily recognizable. Oppression may no longer take the form of physical shackles, chains, slave auction blocks, and genocidal mercenary raids, but perpetration of wrongs continues through myriad ways. Wrongs today are better understood as rituals of humiliation.

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<sup>120</sup>Toobin, "Legacy of Lynching, On Death Row."

<sup>121</sup>See Alexander, *New Jim Crow*.

## FORMATION OF VIOLENT IDENTITIES: THEORIZING CASTE AND RACE

Socially dominant (so-called upper caste) constituencies continuously try to “manipulate liberal democracy in order to consolidate and expand their own power through the reproduction of the old hierarchical order”<sup>122</sup> that kept people “in their place.” Because of such dominant manipulation of liberal democracy, liberal democracy is only an “initial condition” (and not “sufficient condition”) for achieving dignity and freedom for all, especially the most vulnerable and historically disadvantaged.<sup>123</sup>

Sociologists and conservative nationalists (including Gandhi) thought (or, at least hoped) that caste-based violence would vanish in post-independent India. It has, however, not vanished, largely due to the inhospitality of civic society that is still steeped in casteist (that is, based on the logic of caste) ways of thinking and practice. Dominant perspectives often treat caste as a “remnant.” What this caste-as-a-remnant-of-the-past thesis fails to do is interrogate the ways in which dominant castes perpetuate and extend caste discrimination and institutional inequality. Furthermore, the same thesis leaves uninvestigated the role of caste in modern Indian culture and institutions that distributes benefits to those who consolidate and sustain the formation of caste.<sup>124</sup>

Alfred Frankowski makes a similar point in the US context with respect to race. It is as if one needs to talk of “post-raciality” in order to acknowledge the problem of race. The problem that Frankowski skillfully analyzes is one in which categories such as caste and race, if acknowledged, are often seen more as remnants of the past, rather than continuing maladies of our own time. The idea that modernity has somehow overcome “barbarities” is often conditioned by a naive belief in meliorism. This book resists such a naive belief. Rituals of humiliation enable an understanding of discrimination and violence in their brutal but also subtle forms.

In this light, Cox’s commentary on caste and race is important because he notes how modern nation-states continue to perpetuate

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<sup>122</sup>Guru, “Liberal Democracy in India and the Dalit Critique,” 101.

<sup>123</sup>Guru, “Liberal Democracy in India and the Dalit Critique,” 101.

<sup>124</sup>Satyannarayana, “Dalit Reconfiguration of Caste,” 49.



themselves by repeating patterns of violence and rituals of humiliation in the name of “civilization.” As Katie G. Cannon perceptively comments on Cox, “‘Civilization,’ then, comes to mean one’s ability to adjust and integrate oneself consistently into these [often violent] patterns and processes.”<sup>125</sup> Cox’s insights as a sociologist who was critical of American social processes help illumine how “nation” and “civilization” can often foster a false sense of belonging. Cox recognizes the importance of an ethical disposition. To cite Cannon again, “Unlike many social theorists, Cox explicitly spelled out the role of ethics within his own methodological process. He affirmed the duty of the sociologist to unmask views of society that render some as victims.”<sup>126</sup>

Cox was deeply critical of racism and allowed that critical lens to inform his understanding of geopolitics. Cox is thus an early North American critic of Gandhi. He notes how Gandhi in his desire to promote Indian nationalism becomes nevertheless an “advocate” of *varnashramadharma* or “the caste way of life.”<sup>127</sup> It is helpful to recall here that Gandhi, at least until the 1940s, while condemning the “evils” of caste, still expressed faith in the relevance of the caste (*varna*) system “as a fundamental historical institution of the Indian civilisation.”<sup>128</sup> Gandhi is rightly critiqued for making it seem that the logic of caste holds the key for social cohesion in India.

When Cox observes that caste-based social inequality is a “virtue” according to *varnashramadharma*,<sup>129</sup> he is echoing Ambedkar’s critique of Gandhi, although it is not clear whether Cox was aware of Ambedkar. Cox offers a critique of Gandhi in several places in his work. He is suspicious of Gandhi’s remark that “untouchability is not a part of Hinduism”<sup>130</sup> because it makes the logic and practice of caste seem benign, which it is not. Also, Cox is skeptical of Gandhi’s argument that untouchability could be removed while still maintaining the caste system.<sup>131</sup> Although Cox himself sees caste and race as distinct

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<sup>125</sup>Cannon, *Katie’s Canon*, 149.

<sup>126</sup>Cannon, *Katie’s Canon*, 147.

<sup>127</sup>See note 8 in Cox, *Caste, Class and Race*, 22–23.

<sup>128</sup>Banerjee, “Caste and the Writing of History,” 217.

<sup>129</sup>Cox, *Caste, Class and Race*, 24.

<sup>130</sup>Cox, *Caste, Class and Race*, 34.

<sup>131</sup>Cox, *Caste, Class and Race*, 35. See also note 53 on the same page where he quotes Gandhi’s logic at length.

phenomena, there are points of comparison especially with respect to elements of power, descent, repulsion, and, importantly for this book, humiliation.<sup>132</sup>

Cox is a rare exception. Unlike Cox, many in the USA uncritically lift up Gandhi, overlooking his fundamental casteist flaws, as a “model” for resisting race. Most people in the USA know of Gandhi, but not Ambedkar. Ambedkar, however, is not completely eclipsed. The conversation between Ambedkar and W.E.B. Du Bois, although sparse, serves an important role in theorizing caste and race.

The period of Ambedkar’s stay at Columbia University (1913–1916) coincided with the Harlem Renaissance. The Harlem Renaissance inspired Dalit writers and intellectuals<sup>133</sup> and enabled a theorization of caste and race. When Ambedkar came to study at Columbia University in 1913, he was aware of the inadequacies of dominant liberal thinking. Ambedkar, for instance, blames the American North for leaving African-Americans “with no substantive protection from racism and violence at the hands of the Klu Klux Klan and the Southern state governments.”<sup>134</sup> In other words, Ambedkar argued that violence is not only something one directly perpetuates, but also something one is often complicit in.

As the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) was leveraging its case to petition the United Nations to treat racial discrimination as a human rights issue, Ambedkar wrote to Du Bois and asked for copies of the petition and noted that Dalits of India were planning to follow suit. Du Bois responded, communicating his knowledge of Ambedkar and also support for the Dalit cause.<sup>135</sup> The knowledge of these exchanges helps to theorize caste and race.

Du Bois noted importantly that race is something that is performed. “The black man is a person who must ride ‘Jim Crow; in Georgia’,”<sup>136</sup> Du Bois explained. Visweswaran explains rightly that by “Jim Crow,” Du Bois meant “the numerous and demeaning disabilities of law and custom imposed by whites on blacks. Du Bois thus asserted that the experience

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<sup>132</sup>See Loomba, “Race and the Possibilities of Comparative Critique,” 501–522, for an argument regarding the possibilities and legitimacy of comparisons between race and caste.

<sup>133</sup>Limbale, a prominent Dalit writer, wrote his Ph.D. dissertation on Blacks and Dalits. For more context, see Limbale, *Towards an Aesthetic of Dalit Literature*.

<sup>134</sup>Cited in Visweswaran, *Un/common Cultures*, 154.

<sup>135</sup>Cited in Visweswaran, *Un/common Cultures*, 154.

<sup>136</sup>Cited in Visweswaran, *Un/common Cultures*, 149. See Du Bois, *Dusk of Dawn*.

and category of race was created less by biology or blood, than through the social experience of discrimination.”<sup>137</sup> This is where caste and race are similar: the daily experiences of inferiorization, othering, violent wrongs, and rituals of humiliation. In the words of an unnamed Dalit activist, “Caste is not something one is; it is something that is done to you.”<sup>138</sup> Caste and race are not ontological categories. They are what they are *done*. Violent identities are thus formed by uncritical repetition of socially conditioned patterns of behavior that preclude the recognition of wrongs.

In the absence of critical interrogation of the processes and conditions that form human patterns of thinking and inform social practices, humans become unable to stop the cycle of violence in which they are caught and end up reifying violent identities and rigidifying hostile in-group/out-group differences based on caste and race. As Howard Winant highlights, 500 years of “domination of the globe by Europe and its U.S. inheritors”<sup>139</sup> have conditioned so much of history and thinking about human difference. In-groups and out-groups, in this light, continue to live under this ominous shadow of the past. “Privilege,” therefore, is not something that can be shed easily<sup>140</sup> such that discrimination and prejudice collapse as a consequence of such shedding. Winant thus rightly stresses that racial formations continue to mutate and permutate in ways that may not be readily recognized or rejected.<sup>141</sup> Allow me to offer a few examples that show the insidious ways in which caste and race affected and continue to affect social practice. In offering these examples, I am guided by Cox’s critique of caste and Gandhi and Ambedkar’s appreciation of Du Bois’ critique of race.

Indians, especially those from dominant caste locations, upon coming to the USA, align themselves with whiteness and assimilate into dominant patterns of social engagement. I cite Visweswaran to describe this complexity:

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<sup>137</sup>Visweswaran, *Un/common Cultures*, 149.

<sup>138</sup>Visweswaran, *Un/common Cultures*, 150.

<sup>139</sup>Winant, “White Racial Projects,” 108.

<sup>140</sup>Winant, “White Racial Projects,” 107.

<sup>141</sup>Winant, “White Racial Projects,” 100.

South Asians (regardless of their religious or ethnic differences) were counted as members of a “Hindu” race in the census from 1920-1940, but were categorized as white for the next three decades. The period before 1940 bears comment, however. Punjabi men who settled in California married Mexican and Mexican-American women because they were prevented by miscegenation laws from intermarrying with whites—but they were also advised against marrying black women as that would align them with a group hated by whites. At the same time, some south Asians successfully challenged U.S. statutes prohibiting Asians from becoming citizens by arguing that they were Aryan and therefore “white.” While this does not invalidate the community’s claims of exclusion, it does rule out a position of total victimization, thereby complicating the community’s narrative of exclusion.<sup>142</sup>

Because of such problematic entanglements with race, I offer a critique of the phrase “people of color” (here I refer to dominant caste Indians and Indian Americans), a label that often presumes “a narrative of exclusion.”<sup>143</sup> I agree with Visweswaran in challenging this narrative. I do this to understand the enduring malleable and ductile shifting logics of contemporary casteism and racism.<sup>144</sup> In this connection, Linda Martín Alcoff rightly notes that the so-called browning of the USA does not necessarily mean the end of racism and conflict over difference.<sup>145</sup>

Because Indians from dominant social locations are enculturated into the operations of power, the ways in which they align with various people groups in the USA are not without problems and complications.

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<sup>142</sup>Visweswaran, “Diaspora by Design,” 18.

<sup>143</sup>Visweswaran, “Diaspora by Design,” 18.

<sup>144</sup>Naber, “‘Look, Mohammed the Terrorist Is Coming!’” 303. Naber makes an important critical point about the student-led movements in the 1960s that brought various people groups together. While acknowledging that such ecumenical movements in the San Francisco area forged unity by using phrases such as “Third World people” and “people of color,” Naber notes how this paradigm is not as helpful today to understand the malleable and ductile shifting logics of contemporary racism.

<sup>145</sup>American writer and journalist Richard Rodríguez’s 2002 book, *Brown*, argues that everyone in the USA will become “brown.” Rodríguez stands in a line of thinking represented by figures such as Mexican philosopher José Vasconcelos, Franz Boas (known as the “father of American anthropology”), and Randall Kennedy. Rodríguez hopes, like some figures in this school of thinking, that the browning of the USA will mean the end of racism and conflict over difference. See Alcoff, “Comparative Race, Comparative Racisms,” 183.

Indian Americans from dominant caste locations often hide under the “people of color” label when it suits their political interests. At the same time, they espouse anti-Black and other problematic racialized positions—much like the medical doctor whose racialized outburst I recounted at the beginning of the chapter.

Ambedkar’s and Cox’s critiques of Gandhi are relevant today in light of these developments. Gandhi sought to align “brown” with “white” and lamented, during his South African days, that “Indians are little better, if at all, than savages or the Natives of Africa.”<sup>146</sup> In thus seeking to align brown with white, Gandhi assumes an anti-Black position. Further, Gandhi actively recruited Indians in non-combatant roles for the British Empire’s wars, both during his time in South Africa and London.<sup>147</sup> The picture of Gandhi as an anti-apartheid icon is filled with holes.<sup>148</sup>

Commentators from various disciplines have observed problematic entanglements with structural wrongs—so much so that social conditions, identity formation, and violence are often inextricably interwoven. “When confronted with social evil,” feminist critic Sharon Welch notes how “many people assert their good intentions, resist feeling guilty, and claim that they are actually decent people.”<sup>149</sup> Because of the ways in which social conditions inform and form who human persons are, imagination and action are often rooted in a deeper social reality. Womanist ethicist Emilie M. Townes calls this “cultural production of evil.”<sup>150</sup>

On the one hand, this chapter has shown the reality of wrongs that are consciously willed and intended. Such acts of cruelty against others often characterize human relations. On the other hand, the reality of wrongs and the perpetration of rituals of humiliation go deeper than individual intention. A focus on “intention,” even by those who self-identify as liberals,<sup>151</sup> misses out on an important dimension of human

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<sup>146</sup>Cited in Desai and Vahed, *South African Gandhi*, 45.

<sup>147</sup>See the chapter “Man of Peace, Man of War,” in Desai and Vahed, *South African Gandhi*, 280–295.

<sup>148</sup>Activists and civil rights leaders in the USA did adapt Gandhi’s strategies for pursuing nonviolent direct action. This, however, had more to do with the agency of such civil rights leaders rather than Gandhi himself.

<sup>149</sup>Welch, *Feminist Ethic of Risk*, 17.

<sup>150</sup>See Townes, *Womanist Ethics and the Cultural Production of Evil*.

<sup>151</sup>Whitlock and Bronski, *Considering Hate*, 119.

socializing: the role of social structures and social conditioning. Critical legal theorists have also observed the challenges in judicial procedure of having to “prove” intention.<sup>152</sup> Social conditioning affects human behavior to such an extent that discriminatory actions and wrongs often “hide”<sup>153</sup> behind dominant conventions and operate even in the seeming absence of explicitly stated ill intention.

I use the term “conditions” extensively in my work: conditions that affect subject formation, conditions that make human identities violent, and so on. I depend on Judith Butler’s work on subject formation to help me in this theorization. “Conditions,”<sup>154</sup> as Butler explains, are processes of history that inform our habits, form our identities, and influence our actions and reactions (to wrongs, for instance). These conditions have “force” but they are not easily observed, named, or explained. These conditions work through “repetition”<sup>155</sup> of norms that had historical designations of “culture,” “law,” or “religion.” In some places, Butler calls this “reiteration of norms”<sup>156</sup> or “iterability.”<sup>157</sup> Such subconscious “invocation of convention”<sup>158</sup> and circulation of stereotypes and prejudices often hide the “force” of these conditions that inform subject formation.

Butler notes, “there is no ‘I’ that can fully stand apart from the social conditions of its emergence.”<sup>159</sup> When social conditions that shape and influence formation of subjects and self-identities are critically examined, one will find that “giving an account of oneself,” to use the title of one of Butler’s books, becomes a serious task and the “I” or “self” becomes by necessity and also as a consequence, “a social theorist.”<sup>160</sup> This project of ordinary subjects becoming social theorists in their own right is something that this chapter calls for. In thus undertaking the task of theorization, I facilitate a preliminary conversation between caste and race.

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<sup>152</sup>Munro, “Theorizing Race, Theorizing Racism,” 131.

<sup>153</sup>Angela Davis, cited in Whitlock and Bronski, *Considering Hate*, 106. See Davis, “Meaning of Freedom,” 135–152.

<sup>154</sup>Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 7.

<sup>155</sup>Butler, *Excitable Speech*, 36.

<sup>156</sup>Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, xix.

<sup>157</sup>Butler, *Bodies That Matter*, 60.

<sup>158</sup>Butler, *Excitable Speech*, 35.

<sup>159</sup>Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 7.

<sup>160</sup>Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 8.

Such interdisciplinary conversations help to understand violence and wrongs today in ways that will help to resist, transform, and create alternative life-giving modes of being.

Violent identities arise when innocence is ascribed to social practices in such a way that the truth about our selves <sup>161</sup> is not called into question. “To tell the truth about oneself” indeed, as Butler reminds us, “involves us in quarrels about the formation of the self and the social status of truth.”<sup>162</sup> These quarrels arise because we begin to realize how power works through social conditioning.<sup>163</sup> In the absence of such positive quarrels, violent identities begin to form, making it easy for human agents to be complicit in rituals of humiliation.

The problematic nature and function of conditioned human reflexes—both conscious and subconscious—reveal how seemingly ordinary practices have far-reaching political consequences. In the absence of critical interrogation of conditioned reflexes—that is, the conditions that form our patterns of thinking and inform our social practices—the formation of violent identities becomes “natural,” albeit vicious and dangerous. Such violent identities prevent grief/grieving over wrongs.

All this becomes important to recognize especially in light of what Butler describes as an oft-encountered “ethos of self-appreciation.”<sup>164</sup> Readers may encounter the narrative of wrongs described in this chapter and “augment” themselves, create an elaborate “ethos of appreciation” as Butler observes, with “virtuousness”<sup>165</sup> attaching to selves for not being like “other” perpetrators of wrongs. Such an attitude misses how the “self” or “I” is formed by the “we.”<sup>166</sup> It also fails to interrogate the general indifference and apathy to wrongs that arises as a result of not examining social conditions that shape subjects.

Nancy Pineda-Madrid, a liberation theologian who analyzes another context where violence is both extreme and made possible by everyday structures of violence, offers another way to frame the problem. She especially addresses the ways structural violence is glossed or hidden:

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<sup>161</sup>Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 23.

<sup>162</sup>Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself*, 132.

<sup>163</sup>Butler, *Psychic Life of Power*, 2.

<sup>164</sup>Butler, *Dispossession*, 106.

<sup>165</sup>Butler, *Dispossession*, 108.

<sup>166</sup>Butler, *Dispossession*, 107.

Far more often than not the pain of others, particularly that brought on by institutionalized power, remains sequestered from public view. We find numerous ways to keep the social suffering of our time at bay, distant. It slips in and out of our awareness with the passing stories we read in our daily newspapers. Undoubtedly we realize that recognizing social suffering will be personally costly. It is far easier to view the pain of others as a misfortune occurrence, the poor luck of draw, rather than as a product brought about by unjust systems and structures.<sup>167</sup>

When structural violence is thus hidden or glossed over, it consequently impedes grief. Bama, too, observes the way structural violence is often rendered invisible within the “order of things,” when she remarks “News of many events come to our ears, whether we want to listen or not. We pay attention to some of it. To much of it, we pay no heed.”<sup>168</sup> We learn from Bama that theologizing and theorizing about suffering and speaking on behalf of victims and survivors without paying full attention to suffering’s concrete nature, causes, consequences, and possible earthly cures, are major pitfalls. In other words, abstractions in theory and theology, without an empirical matrix or reference, obstruct the recognition of concrete lived experience of suffering.

In many ways, the wrongs described in this chapter demonstrate the way in which human bodies are used to acting and reacting in socially conditioned ways that contribute to the formation of violent identities and perpetration of wrongs. Often, such formations and perpetrations are not readily recognized as “violent.” Paying attention to this problematic—what I call “grammar of the body” and “socially conditioned corporeal habits” in the next chapter—will help agents to recognize and interrogate violent identities, thus acting as a precondition for agential grief.

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<sup>167</sup>Pineda-Madrid, *Suffering and Salvation in Ciudad Juárez*, 59.

<sup>168</sup>Bama, *Sangati*, ix.



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