

## Conference Abstracts and Bios

### Session 1

#### **Nico Slate: “Race, Caste, and Color: Analogies that Open and Close”**

For over a hundred years, scholars and social reformers have compared race and caste. The words “race” and “caste,” which originated in the context of slavery and imperialism, both operate as translations between a variety of distinct social, political, and economic structures. They are metaphors. Thus, race/caste comparison is a kind of layered analogy, a comparison of comparisons. All metaphors contain a bridging function. By likening this to that, they do more than suggest similarity; they create new ways of thinking. The generative power of the analogy makes it easy to celebrate what historian George M. Fredrickson called “the comparative imagination.” Yet analogies can also divide and obscure, and the history of race/caste comparison is replete with examples of analogous thinking being deployed in defense of hypocrisy and oppression. In my presentation, I will offer a brief overview of the history of race/caste analogies, from the early twentieth century to Isabel Wilkerson’s bestselling volume, *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*. I will compare race/caste analogies with transracial and transnational conceptions of color. Ultimately, I will argue that the impact of a particular analogy depends on the context in which it is deployed, as well as the degree to which it opens or closes opportunities for further reflection or action.

*Nico Slate* is professor of history at Carnegie Mellon University, where his research and teaching focuses on the history of social movements in the United States and India. He is the author of four books, including his latest, *Lord Cornwallis is Dead: The Struggle for Democracy in the United States and India*. Currently, Dr. Slate is working on four books and two edited volumes, which range across subjects such as the transnational history of South Asia; race and racism in Los Angeles; and the life and work of Kamaladevi Chattopadhyay, one of India’s most dedicated antiracist activists.

#### **Anupama Rao: “American Caste”**

Although it is subtended by the forms of mass action and national unity imagined by anticolonialism across the twentieth century, the complex intersection between race and caste as social analytics exhibits a curious bifurcation.

On the one hand, the post-WW II, Cold War conjuncture appears to be defined by the primacy of race and racism, which appears as global shorthand for addressing the exclusionary logics associated with embodied difference— from B. R. Ambedkar’s famous 1946 correspondence with W. E. B. Du Bois, to affinities between black radical politics and the Dalit Panthers, to efforts to include caste at the WCAR in 2001, and finally, recent associations between the Black Lives Matter movement and the insistence that Dalit Lives Matter.

One is struck, on the other hand, by the extent to which caste (and the critique of Brahminism in particular) organized ideas regarding extra-economic coercion and archaic practices of distinction across the Americas, and the United States in particular across the nineteenth and the early twentieth century. (In fact, Isabel Wilkerson's focus on the "caste school of social relations" in her book *Caste* marks the tail end of a set of extended reflections on the caste-race dialectic in American intellectual life.)

My presentation takes up Ambedkar's important arguments about the *difference* of race and caste (e.g., in his 1916 essay, "Castes in India") precisely at a moment when the latter was being deployed widely and in rather contradictory ways both to mark socio-economic stratification and forms of stigma and repulsion in the lexicon of AfricanAmerican thinkers, and by Du Bois in particular.

The broader question I would address is the place of race and caste as concept-metaphors in the context of American social science in the interwar, and their relationship to an emergent politics of knowledge, both engaged and insurgent, as this was being developed and deployed by the two representative figures, Ambedkar and Du Bois.

**Anupama Rao** is Professor of History, and Professor in the Department of Middle Eastern, South Asian, and African Studies at Barnard College and Columbia University. She has written widely on the themes of colonialism and humanitarianism, and on non-Western histories of gender and sexuality. Her book, *The Caste Question*, theorizes caste subalternity. Dr. Rao is the organizer of the Ambedkar Initiative at Columbia; she is working on a book on the political thought of Ambedkar; and she has a project titled *Dalit Bombay*, which exploring caste, political culture, and everyday life in colonial and postcolonial Bombay.

### **Meena Dhanda: "Anti-Casteism as Praxis"**

**Meena Dhanda** is Professor of Philosophy and Cultural Politics at the University of Wolverhampton, where she also leads a research group called Language, Power, and Society. She is engaged in empirically informed social, moral, and political philosophy, and she is internationally recognized as a leading academic in the development of diaspora Dalit studies. She is the author of two books: *The Negotiation of Personal Identity* and *Reservations for Women*.

### **Siddhesh Gautam: "Cactus in the forest: The aesthetics of the Oppressed Castes"**

There is hardly any representation and acknowledgment of the artists from the oppressed castes in India. The global representation of the collective expression of India is still mediocre and limited to the exploration and expression of Brahminical aesthetics. The illegitimate contractors of art in India are so tied up with the arrogance of their mythical culture that they neither accept the aesthetics of the oppressed and indigenous communities nor acknowledge the global pool of artistic intelligence. They are stuck with romanticising on their mythology, celebrating the redundant colour palettes and justifying gods and goddesses as feminists, modernists, scientists and what not. And whenever they look at the west, they simply copy for easy profits. There seems to be no deep ideology or ethical manifesto that artists and designers follow in the subcontinent to create inspiring and important work.

If one visit any dalit-advansi (Oppressed Castes and Tribals) habitat, one will find something new and original in each household along with the kitsch that the predecessors of the

oppressors have been flooding the markets with. Art in India is a property of a few Upper Caste and Upper Class people who seem to produce art only for their capitalist aspirations. The English-speaking dictators of the art business are still stuck with the mythical flying men and European and American aesthetics appropriated by Indian artists in their mythological compositions.

When a handful of people have been monopolising aesthetics and forcing 80% of the population to buy and indulge in the aesthetics practiced by 20% of the population, we can't document them as 'Indian art'. I reject such notion of Indian art and Indian art history where the oppressed communities, who actually built their artefacts, temples, mosques, palaces, libraries and so on are not even mentioned in the history books, research papers and popular culture. I reject these so-called 'Indian aesthetics' that reject the sweat and blood of the real artists and craftspersons of the subcontinent. I am not interested in their redundant brahminised versions of art and aesthetics. I am one of the cactuses in the forests, long ignored. And, I am not a cactus in solitude. It is time that we make our presence noticed with the thorns that we adorn, the form that we develop into and the colours that we change. Through this conference I'd be presenting my work along with the many stories and lived experiences of the artists of the Oppressed Communities of India.

**Siddhesh Gautam** is a Delhi-based independent multi-discipline, mixed-media artist, designer, writer, researcher, treasure hunter, fallen angel, soul searcher, and Ambedkarite. His work encourages people to live deeply, love fearlessly, and to appreciate the gift of life. While minimalism and post-modernism are the main influences that inform his work, it is based on in-depth research on the subject. He aims to create more than superficially beautiful objects. His work aims to challenge preconceptions, expand minds, honour the scared, and evoke feelings of adventure, exploration, and deep spiritual connection.

## Session 2

### **Crispin Bates: "Uncasting and Recasting the Colonial Indian Labour Migrant"**

**Crispin Bates** is Professor of Modern and Contemporary South Asian History at The University of Edinburgh, where he teaches modern South Asian history. Dr. Bates has published widely on various aspects of Indian social and economic history, especially concerning rural Indian (and tribal) labour and labour migration. He has also lectured and written extensively on contemporary aspects of Indian social and political development. Recently, he has been leading a new AHRC research project: 'Becoming "Coolies."' It concerns the history of South Asian overseas labour migration in the colonial era, on which a book series with Oxford University Press is forthcoming.

### **Youlendree Appasamy/Kutti Collective: "Broken Promises: Why Land, Language and Indentureship Matter"**

What does caste mean to me/us? In the South African Indian indentured population, the logics of caste were transposed to linguistic groups, and for many Indian South Africans of indentured ancestry, caste knowledge is lost – although the discrimination and policing underlying casteism hasn't. The first part of this presentation is a collage of historical moments, art, literature and film that delves into the ways caste moves in hidden ways in Indian South Africa communities, especially those who are part of the indentured diaspora. The second part of the presentation is a softer space, with a conversation with the Kutti

Collective [via Zoom], where we speak more about our artistic practice and lived experiences of casteism through gender, colourism, queerness and more.

***Youlendree Appasamy*** is a feminist free radical based in Johannesburg, South Africa. Youlendree works across writing, collage, and zine-making to excavate unusual and affective histories of Indian indentureship in South Africa, with a specific focus on gender-making and kinship in this diaspora. They're a part of the Kutti Collective, a group of queer Indian South African artists and cultural workers.

### **Nira Wickramasinghe: “Slavery and Blackness in the Indian Ocean World”**

This presentation will explore the gradual disappearance of Asian slaves in texts and in the collective memory of the people of Sri Lanka. It addresses the re-writing of history around the space called ‘Slave Island’ in Colombo where a murder committed by Indonesian slaves gets transformed into a ‘kaffir’ slave revolt in popular memory and guide books. It focuses on the social and political conditions that produced taxonomies and the political and moral projects that were served by the appearance and disappearance of certain categories of classification. Using the Sri Lankan case as a starting point, I will expand the argument to other Indian ocean territories such as Mauritius and Cape where the Indian slave has faded from popular memory and blackness gradually acquired a similar equivalence with African roots and enslavement.

***Nira Wickramasinghe*** is Professor of Modern South Asian Studies at the Leiden University Institute for Area Studies. Her primary interests include identity politics, everyday life under colonialism, and the relationship between state and society in modern South Asia. Dr. Wickramasinghe’s most recent book, *Slave in a Palanquin: Colonial Servitude and Resistance in Sri Lanka*, uncovers the traces of slavery in the history and memory of the Indian Ocean world. The book was awarded the prestigious John F. Richards Prize in 2021 by the American Historical Association.

### **Ananya Jahanara Kabir: “Douglas Dance: The Radical Indeterminacy of Creolised Being”**

Discussions of indentured labour have privileged the disruptions of caste hierarchies that occurred in the process of crossing the proverbial ‘kala pani’. How do these disruptions relate to encounters between differently racialized groups on the Plantation? My presentation will address these questions by focusing on ‘douglas’: an indeterminate, creolised figure generated through the flow of peoples and cultures between the Indian and Atlantic Oceans. Straddling islands, heartlands, coastlines, and continents, what can this figure tell us about intersectionalities of caste, race, and gender, and how can creolisation theory help us grasp the Douglas’s significance?

This talk will draw on archival materials around the celebrated ballet ‘Douglas’, created by Trinidadian choreographer, dancer, and artist Geoffrey Holder, as well as the repertoire of Shailesh Bhoran, Dutch choreographer and dancer of Indo-Surinamese heritage.

***Ananya Jahanara Kabir*** is Professor of English Literature at King’s College London. She researches the intersection of the written text with other forms of cultural expression within acts of collective memorialization and forgetting. The author of several books and edited volumes, Dr. Kabir is currently at work on research projects that explore the concepts of

transoceanic creolization through cultural production across the Atlantic and Indian Ocean worlds.

### Session 3

#### **Ruchi Chaturvedi: “The Man Who Flies, the Womxn who Hides: Surviving War and Supremacism”**

This paper juxtaposes semi-fictional tales penned at the time of civil war in apartheid KwaZulu and Natal to scenes of xenophobic and negrophobic violence in post-apartheid South Africa. Written accounts by black working-class men and women caught in the 1980s Natal war between Inkatha and United Democratic Front (UDF) cadres, as well narratives of undocumented “foreign (African) nationals” detained by the current South African state are central to the paper. Apartheid apologists explained away the 1980s war between the Inkatha and UDF members as an instance of primordial “black on black violence” clouding over the structural and political forces that produced it. At the same time, the apartheid state raised walls, mobilized emergency powers, secret service and police against the specter of “black danger” or “swart gevaar” (an Afrikaans term frequently mobilized to signify white anxieties about black urbanization and popular politics). Today new iterations of that danger are spurring South Africans to turn against other Africans. Against that backdrop I discuss narratives of flight, fugitivity, as well as buckling down to survive the workings of settler colonialism and negrophobic nationalism. I read them alongside stories of surviving upper caste violence and Hindutva supremacy in North India to reflect on the political possibilities thrown up by these spaces of vulnerability.

*Ruchi Chaturvedi* (University of Cape Town) is a political and legal anthropologist who works on cultures of democracy, popular politics, and political violence in postcolonial democracies. Chaturvedi’s key research focus has been on formation of antagonistic political communities and emergence of violent majoritarianism in India. She is the author of *Violence of Democracy: Inter-party conflict in South India*, which will be published by Duke University Press in 2023. Her new project compares histories of nationalism and majoritarian formations in South Asia and South Africa attending particularly to womxn’s experience of violent transitions from coloniality to postcolonial rule.

#### **Atul Bhalla: “A Sense of Site/s, off and on the Body”**

The talk will foreground how the performative in my practice as an artist questions the location and addresses the notions of the other in works executed at different locations in India and outside. The talk will try to show how these works implicate the self and the other through works executed in the public domain at sites in India, Shanghai, Hamburg and Johannesburg. How sites, of both the body and the location, play their part in informing the work and its reception. How the singularity of experience and participation/intervention addresses the other. How confrontation whether as walker, tourist, traveller, local or foreigner may elicit questions of history, citizenship, rights and responsibilities that may inform practice and lead to an informed existence of the self and of the other. How this proximity may inform our acceptance and tolerance, and how we may allow or are allowed to challenge the limits of such enterprises.

Some works of the works will be addressed though in short are

- Death, the river and me 2005
- Listener from West Heavens -Shanghai 2010
- Immersions 2011
- What will be my defeat?-Hamburg 2011
- To Dvaipayana 2014
- Excavated distance of Gold -Johannesburg 2018

*Atul Bhalla* is Professor and Head of Department in the Department of Art and Performing Arts at Shiv Nadar University. He is a conceptual artist working with environmental issues, particularly those surrounding water, for more than two decades. He has explored the physical, historical, and political significance of water in the urban environment of New Delhi through artworks that incorporate sculpture, painting, installation, video, photography, and performance. Bhalla engages with the eco-politics of water as well as explores histories and associative meanings of sites of everyday living, often building narratives through performance.

### **Aditya Bharadwaj: “(In)visible Caste, (In)visible Race: The Assisted Conception and Regeneration of Life”**

Advance biotechnologies of life are rapidly redefining our relationship to health, life and living. From conception to death, the material and notional meaning of ‘life’ is being (re)conceived, (re)generated and (re)assembled to (re)make life as technologically interpolated. It is in this spectacular scene of ‘pure’ science and emerging investments in promissory value of life, where human embryos as beacon of biotechnologically mediated procreation get sutured to human embryonic stem cells as regenerative face of new biomedicine, that we stumble upon seemingly valuable but ‘value neutral’ biogenetic substance gestating in cultural media brimming with race and caste.

The visible biogenetic substance awash with (in)visible caste and (in)visible race begins to assume a therapeutic attribute. The deep substantive presence of both caste and race has long been clear to anthropologists examining commensality and relatedness, marginalization and exclusion, violence and prejudice. However, this biotechnological inflection is much more than good science gone bad. It is rather a ‘clinical’ process of encryption, variously imagined as therapeutically viable with potential for efficacy or harm, that continually (re)turns to the stratified origin story of biogenetic material.

*Aditya Bharadwaj* is Professor of Anthropology and Sociology, and Chair, in the Department of Anthropology and Sociology, at the Geneva Graduate Institute. His research uncovers the local and global dimensions underscoring the production, utilisation and circulation of biomedicine and biotechnologies, with a focus on the rise of bioscience and biotechnologies in India. The author and coauthor of several books and edited volumes, Dr. Bharadwaj’s current research covers two major contemporary developments in the domain of bioscience in India, namely: assisted reproductive technologies and human embryonic stem cells.

### **Manuela Ciotti: “From #BlackLivesMatter to #DalitLivesMatter: Caste and Race in the Life of a Hashtag”**

First used on Twitter in 2014, #DalitLivesMatter (#DLM) – an obvious tribute to #BlackLivesMatter - is one of the latest chapters in the history of cross-fertilisations between

Dalit struggles against casteism and African American ones against white supremacy. This paper draws upon a digital humanities project that resulted in a body of tweets featuring #DLM (harvested from Twitter during 2014-20). The paper examines the production of a textual and visual narrative braiding events and leaders of the Civil Rights and Dalit Movements and episodes of violence against African American and Dalit individuals and communities.

The analysis of this multi-temporal narrative shows the ways in which race and caste violence prompts waves of digital affect of very different intensity, privileging the former over the latter. The presence of such asymmetries interrogates the possibilities and the spaces for transnational solidarities. In turn, the life of #DLM offers an opportunity to reflect on how the frameworks of necropolitics and thanatopolitics may explain the above difference in the digital public sphere.

**Manuela Ciotti** is Professor of the Social and Cultural Anthropology of the Global South at the University of Vienna. Over more than two decades, she has conducted fieldwork in India, the US, and Italy on questions of modernity, subaltern communities, gender and politics, art and anthropology, biennales, and art collecting. The author of two books and a rich body of essays, Dr. Ciotti is part of the 2022-2023 cohort at the Netherlands Institute for Advanced Study (NIAS). She will be completing a monograph on the global spread of modern and contemporary art from India through exhibitions held at several world locations.